The Soft Touch

Molding “hard” dogs into “soft” dogs may be easier than you think—and it also saves lives

BY MELISSA BAHLEDA
Peering from the kennel she’s occupied for weeks, Lizzy, a black-and-tan adolescent Doberman mix, watches and waits anxiously for the next human to walk through the door.

Lizzy qualifications as a difficult, or “hard,” dog. Every shelter usually has a few; some have more than a few. These dogs come from varied backgrounds and breeds, but most have suffered from neglect and a lack of proper or adequate socialization with humans and other dogs. Many were chained, tied, or kenneled inappropriately. Nearly all suffer from lack of adequate exercise, stimulation, and energy release.

A hard dog is not necessarily an aggressive dog. Hard, non-aggressive dogs are likely to display out-of-control be-
helping hard dogs

One way to teach “hard dogs” self-control is to train them to eat properly with other dogs. In the foreground, Meg, a brindle terrier mix fostered by dog trainer and behavior counselor Melissa Bahleda, learns to eat with Bahleda’s other dogs.

behavior, will be difficult to handle and assess, but will show no signs of dominance aggression, resource guarding, or other types of aggression during their assessments. These dogs may put teeth on skin during play sessions or assessment, but this should not be confused with biting if there is no overt attempt to cause injury or threaten (as there is in cases of dominance aggression). Teeth-to-skin contact, as well as “accidental” scratching, is more often than not the result of the dogs’ inability to control themselves and display what most humans and other dogs consider to be “normal” or appropriate behavior.

When introduced to other dogs, hard dogs often appear desperate to interact, and will approach other dogs in an out-of-control, rushed fashion that the other dog may find threatening. So while neither dog may be truly aggressive, the hard dog’s inability to control himself—along with his nervous energy—may result in a fight. That’s why it’s important to carefully supervise any interaction these dogs have with other dogs, at least until their behavior can be modified.

Sadly, the outcome for many of these dogs is often euthanasia. Many, especially the large dogs, tend to be deemed “unadoptable” simply because they are so difficult to handle and because of the potential for accidental injury resulting from their out-of-control behavior.

Many limited-intake shelters and rescue groups hesitate to take these dogs for the same reasons. Volunteers, shelter staff, and foster-care providers who are willing to work with hard dogs often end up scratched, bruised, and frustrated, and give up on their canine pupils after little progress has been made. Misunderstanding, impatience, and anger can take a toll on these already frustrated canines, and inappropriate or inconsistent attempts to modify their behavior can make a bad situation even worse for these dogs and those who work around them.

Better Options for Hard Dogs

Are there other options for these dogs? Yes, there are! And there is even better news: Modifying the behavior of these dogs may not be as difficult or as long-term a process as many people believe. The application of a few easy-to-apply behavior modification techniques can yield dramatic changes in just a few days—truly a miracle for a dog who, without them, might end up being euthanized.

Anyone—a shelter worker, rescue volunteer, or foster-care provider—who decides to work with difficult dogs should have dog-handling experience and a basic understanding of canine behavior. The safety of all humans involved with the dog must come first. For this reason, I recommend only working with dogs who have been thoroughly assessed and found to be completely non-aggressive. If a dog begins to show any type of aggression during the behavior modification process, the assistance of a professional trainer or behaviorist should be sought, and other options
considered before attempting to move forward. If the dog begins to show aggression at any point, it’s likely an indication of more serious underlying issues.

**Begin at the Beginning**

One of the first and most essential components of modifying almost any inappropriate behavior is proper exercise.

Unless you have a team of fit volunteers who happen to be training for a marathon, it is unlikely you will be able to provide these dogs with enough walks to supply them with the amount of exercise they’ll need to become mentally and physically calm. In the beginning, hard dogs may need long stretches of exercise to make up for weeks or months of inadequate energy release and to combat the symptoms of cage anxiety.

For this reason, I highly recommend a daily, or even twice-daily, supervised, controlled romp or game of fetch in a fenced area, followed by a controlled walk.

These supervised play sessions should last a minimum of 20-25 minutes (shorter durations in hot weather) and can involve Frisbees, balls, or other exercise-inducing toys. (My favorite is the Chuckit! line, which can be used to toss a tennis ball long distances without the need for slobbery ball handling.)

It is not important that the dog actually fetch the object—although this time can also be used to teach appropriate play drive and even fetching. What is important is that the dog use this time as an opportunity to appropriately release pent-up energy and get the exercise he needs, and have the opportunity to move forward unfettered, which is an inherent and necessary behavior for all dogs. You can use a variety of toys and other tools to stimulate the dog to move during this supervised romp. If the dog is friendly and non-aggressive with other dogs, find another non-aggressive, high-energy dog and allow them to romp together (supervised, of course). You can even play a game of tag with the dog yourself, as long as this does not over-stimulate the dog and lead to wild leaps at your face or tackling maneuvers.

If the dog becomes overstimulated at any time, leash him and walk him around quietly until he calms. The leash can also be used to keep the dog from jumping and flailing at you. At every point in this process, it is best to encourage him to keep “all four on the floor.”

Once the dog appears to be tiring (and happy!) from his unfettered romp, you now have an opportunity to teach him how to walk on leash and move forward with humans instead of pulling and working against them. Now that he has had the opportunity to release stored energy, his mind will be in a better state to focus on commands and comply with your wishes. As you leash him, be sure you are in a calm, confident state; otherwise you are likely to confuse or overstimulate the dog.

Quietly slip the leash over the dog’s head, show him one of the tasty treats you have in your pocket, say “Let’s go!” in a high, happy voice, and begin walking. If he begins to pull right away, immediately stop and wait, or turn in order to regain the dog’s attention using the treats, then begin walking again.

The trick is to help the dog begin to understand that a walk is a walk and not a drag session. Reward the dog with treats and praise when he stops with you and walks without pulling. Stop and wait for the dog to halt whenever he begins to pull, and then continue moving forward, halting whenever he pulls. The act of moving forward is a reward in itself, and most dogs will quickly catch on and learn to work for this reward by “checking in” with you and moving back to your side, which is where you want him to be. (For more information on teaching the controlled walk, as well as the other three basic commands featured in this article, please go to animalsheltering.org/partners_lessons.)

**Teaching Life Skills**

Once you have begun to get control of the dog on leash, and he begins to respond to your walk commands, halts, and praise, it’s time to teach him a few other basic “life skills” he will need to learn in order to realize self-control and maintain himself successfully in his adoptive home.

The first of these is “sit.” While “sit” may seem like just a basic, maybe even unnecessary obedience command, it is the basis for setting up a system of compliance and self-control in any dog, especially a hard dog. After all, everyone likes a sitting dog.

Utilizing patience, a leash, and a treat held above the dog’s head while giving the “sit” command will inevitably lead to the desired response. Be quick to give praise as soon as the dog’s rump hits the floor. Most dogs can learn this command and begin executing it successfully and consistently in just one or two short training sessions.

Once the dog has learned to sit on command, you have an appropriate, calm behavior you can begin to use to replace jumping, lunging, and other forms of inappropriate behavior. Once the dog understands that he’ll get no reward—treats, praise, physical affection, or interaction—for inappropriate behavior, but get everything his heart desires when he sits, he will quickly learn to replace previously unacceptable behaviors with the “sit.” You now have a dog beginning to understand the concept of self-control! Learning to sit also begins to establish an understanding of the causality in the command-compliance-reward system. When this happens, teaching other basic obedience commands becomes much easier. Once the dog is sitting on command—meaning that he complies the first time the command is given—it’s the perfect time to begin teaching other commands, especially “off” and “come.”

Learning “off”—directing a dog away from or off of an object—is key to self-control for all dogs, and will be much appreciated by everyone who comes in contact with them. It also greatly increases adoptability. Teaching “come” yields
helping hard dogs

provide the calming effect: “Eeeeeeaaaaassssss yyyyyyy.” Whether you are sitting, crouched, or standing, you will want to remain still and refrain from touching the dog or saying anything other than “easy,”—though you can say “good” as the dog begins to calm. Don’t converse with anyone else during this process, as your voice and movement may stimulate the dog. Simply focus on calming the dog. Otherwise, your efforts will be only minimally successful.

Once you have had some time to practice this technique and have begun to master the transfer of calm, confident energy to your canine companions, you will simply be amazed at the wonderful effect that spending just a few short moments executing this exercise will have on most dogs.

For dogs who don’t respond well to the “easy” command, a more extreme method of calming may be required. I like to use an exercise called “settle,” although this technique can be more difficult to master, especially if the person attempting the exercise has not had extensive handling experience or is not in a calm, relaxed state.

It can also be dangerous if the dog’s behavior and temperament have not been properly assessed, as this is also the technique used by many shelters and trainers to test for dominance and other types of aggression. But if the dog has been found by a professional evaluator to be completely non-aggressive, and if you have built a good rapport and relationship with the dog during your obedience and walking sessions, this exercise will be the icing on the cake in your modification process.

Get yourself into the same calm and confident state of mind as recommended for the “easy” command, and begin by sitting or crouching next to the dog, who should be on leash. Entice the dog into a down position, either by using a treat or by gently sliding the dog into a down position using your hands. (If you have taught the dog “down” during your obedience session, this will make the process even simpler.) Once the dog is lying prone on the floor, gently slide the dog over on his side while quietly saying “settle,” in a calm, quiet voice.

If the dog begins to panic or struggle, do not battle with him; simply start over and continue until you can get the dog to remain quietly on his side for several seconds. Once you have achieved this, give a release command—“OK!”—and then remove your hand and allow the dog to stand. Reward him for his compliance.

As you continue to practice this exercise, extend the period of time you expect him to remain on his side. The longer he remains in this position in a relaxed state, the more his breathing and heart rate will slow, leading to true, physiological relaxation. Once your hard dog achieves this level of relaxation, he will be well on his way to the transformation

respect and bonding, and greatly reduces the chance of escape, thereby also reducing the risk of injury or death resulting from escape. Working toward consistent recall while the dog is on leash is essential. Expecting any dog, especially a hard dog, to consistently come when called when off-leash is unrealistic if he has not had the opportunity to learn that “come” means “come to me each and every time you’re called” without the distraction of ultimate freedom. Moving to long-line work or a safe, fenced area once the dog is complying consistently on leash is also an important step in teaching consistent informal recall.

Easy Does It

Along with appropriate exercise and basic obedience, calming exercises are also an essential component of molding a hard dog into a soft dog. And don’t let the term “exercise” frighten you; these are even easier to execute than the basic obedience lessons. Mastering these two basic techniques will enable you to come to the aid of every anxious, confused, or difficult-to-handle dog that passes through your facility.

The first and most basic of the calming techniques is “easy.” Simply hold the dog’s collar in a firm and confident, yet gentle and calm manner, and say “easy” in a quiet, relaxed, calm voice. Draw the word out, using your voice to

“Hard dogs” often have so much pent-up energy that you likely won’t be able to give them enough walks to make them physically and mentally calm. But regular supervised play sessions, featuring activities such as romping and fetching, can help these dogs get the exercise they need.

Easy Does It

Along with appropriate exercise and basic obedience, calming exercises are also an essential component of molding a hard dog into a soft dog. And don’t let the term “exercise” frighten you; these are even easier to execute than the basic obedience lessons. Mastering these two basic techniques will enable you to come to the aid of every anxious, confused, or difficult-to-handle dog that passes through your facility.

The first and most basic of the calming techniques is “easy.” Simply hold the dog’s collar in a firm and confident, yet gentle and calm manner, and say “easy” in a quiet, relaxed, calm voice. Draw the word out, using your voice to

provide the calming effect: “Eeeeeeaaaaassssss yyyyyyy.” Whether you are sitting, crouched, or standing, you will want to remain still and refrain from touching the dog or saying anything other than “easy,”—though you can say “good” as the dog begins to calm. Don’t converse with anyone else during this process, as your voice and movement may stimulate the dog. Simply focus on calming the dog. Otherwise, your efforts will be only minimally successful.

Once you have had some time to practice this technique and have begun to master the transfer of calm, confident energy to your canine companions, you will simply be amazed at the wonderful effect that spending just a few short moments executing this exercise will have on most dogs.

For dogs who don’t respond well to the “easy” command, a more extreme method of calming may be required. I like to use an exercise called “settle,” although this technique can be more difficult to master, especially if the person attempting the exercise has not had extensive handling experience or is not in a calm, relaxed state.

It can also be dangerous if the dog’s behavior and temperament have not been properly assessed, as this is also the technique used by many shelters and trainers to test for dominance and other types of aggression. But if the dog has been found by a professional evaluator to be completely non-aggressive, and if you have built a good rapport and relationship with the dog during your obedience and walking sessions, this exercise will be the icing on the cake in your modification process.

Get yourself into the same calm and confident state of mind as recommended for the “easy” command, and begin by sitting or crouching next to the dog, who should be on leash. Entice the dog into a down position, either by using a treat or by gently sliding the dog into a down position using your hands. (If you have taught the dog “down” during your obedience session, this will make the process even simpler.) Once the dog is lying prone on the floor, gently slide the dog over on his side while quietly saying “settle,” in a calm, quiet voice.

Once he is on his side, let your hand rest on his side near his heart, while keeping your other hand on the leash. Do not keep the leash taut, and do not press on the dog, but rather rest your hand on him in an assuring, comforting way while also encouraging him to remain still.

If the dog begins to panic or struggle, do not battle with him; simply start over and continue until you can get the dog to remain quietly on his side for several seconds. Once you have achieved this, give a release command—“OK!”—and then remove your hand and allow the dog to stand. Reward him for his compliance.

As you continue to practice this exercise, extend the period of time you expect him to remain on his side. The longer he remains in this position in a relaxed state, the more his breathing and heart rate will slow, leading to true, physiological relaxation. Once your hard dog achieves this level of relaxation, he will be well on his way to the transformation
you have worked so hard to achieve, and you will now—or very soon, with a little more work—find yourself in the presence of a well-mannered, easy-to-handle, highly adoptable soft dog.

**Other Considerations**

Providing socialization opportunities for your hard dog during the “softening” process will also be helpful. These sessions should be supervised, and the dog should only be allowed contact with other non-aggressive dogs who are not “bullies” (overly dominant), overly submissive, or “rough players.” The key is to teach proper play methods and allow for energy release without overstimulating the dog.

Do not hesitate to leash your dog and even remove him from the play area if he begins to play too roughly, or if he fails to heed your calls and commands. This will help him learn that you expect him to behave appropriately and respond to you even when he is distracted and having fun.

A final note on calming elements: Many shelters, due to budget limitations and a desire to minimize animals’ stress, do not sterilize a pet until he or she has been chosen for adoption. But if you’re working with a hard dog who is un-neutered, any success you have will be minimalized by the dog’s innate desire to reproduce. Whenever possible, dogs should be spayed or neutered prior to any attempt to modify behavior.

**Ensuring Long-term Success**

Finally, the day has come! You have put in the time and effort, and it’s paid off. Your sweet, adoptable dog, previously considered unadoptable and too difficult to handle, is now responsive, respectful, and no longer “accidently dangerous.” He is ready for his new home, and his chance of success there is now very high.

There are some basic preparations you can make to help ensure his success. Let potential adopters know about his previous issues, and what you have done to reform them. Share the lesson plans (online at animalsheltering.org/partners-canines), and show the prospective adopters how to perform these commands—this will not only help make the transfer a smooth one, it will showcase your dog’s new talents. Tell them about his exercise and nutritional needs, his toy preferences, and give them information about crating and house-training methods. Over the years, I have successfully adopted out hundreds of foster dogs—many of them “hard dogs turned soft”—into wonderful, devoted, lifelong homes. I have found that being willing to share information and being available if and when issues arise are instrumental to successful adoptions, and even more importantly, to retention. After all, I likely know more about their new pet than anyone else!

This process has helped scores of dogs like Lizzy. Three days before she was scheduled to be euthanized, I picked her up from my local shelter. And she was indeed wide-eyed, frenzied, and out of control. After only three days of exercise, controlled walks, a few basic obedience lessons, and some calming time, I could see the diamond in the rough: She was incredibly smart, loving, and highly adoptable, but the experience of being kenneled for more than two months with inadequate exercise and few opportunities for energy release or appropriate stimulation had simply left her suffering intensely from kennel frenzy.

After two weeks, Lizzy was completely housetrained, crate-trained, and performed all of the obedience lessons she had been taught like a pro, even off leash! Most importantly, she was sweet, respectful, and affectionate, a true companion. I hung fliers and spread the word, and when the call came, I knew she was ready.

Today, Lizzy’s family boasts of her good behavior to their friends. She is helping one of her humans as he recovers from cancer treatment, and for another she serves as a source of companionship, exercise, and entertainment. They consider her to be a priceless member of their family. It would have been a shame if she hadn’t found her way into their lives.