SHOW UP AT A CONFERENCE on dog training, and you will likely find workshops on topics such as understanding body language, teaching through positive reinforcement and managing aggression. Of course, these are important issues, but the focus is all on one end of the leash. What is seldom discussed is the person connected to the dog.

I've worked with dogs and their people for close to 20 years. Maybe it's my background in teaching and social work that has given me a different perspective, but I've learned to focus more on the person than on the dog. And I've come to see that just as no two marriages are the same, every human-canine relationship is unique.

In the world of dog training, this is a bit of a novel concept. Trainers and other experts have long promoted various sets of rigid rules for human-canine interactions. Today, many people still accept as universal truths that dogs should sit before taking a treat, shouldn't walk in front of their people and shouldn't sleep in the bed.
Those rules may work just fine for some, but others choose to live differently with their dogs, even if training manuals leave them with the nagging sense that they’re “doing it wrong.” Years ago, when visiting a friend’s house, I was greeted with the deafening roar of what sounded like a pack of hyenas. But it was just Kaiser, a large Akita mix showing what would typically be called barrier aggression—hence the less-than-welcoming greeting. Even though my friend hadn’t requested any training advice, I spent the next 30 minutes talking to her about techniques we could use to help Kaiser with his “issues.”

When I finally stopped blabbing about desensitizing Kaiser to strangers and creating more positive associations with the door, my friend explained that she liked that her dog made a ruckus at the door. She pointed out that although he made a lot of noise, Kaiser was harmless and never actually got within 2 feet of me.

This experience forced me to look a bit closer at how often we in the training field jump to conclusions about how people should live with their dogs. And that the language of dog training—with its emphasis on “commands” and “control”—also sends the wrong message.

Since 2011, I’ve worked with the HSUS Pets for Life program to bring pet care resources to underserved communities. Relationships are the guiding principle in our training sessions with clients. Our trainers don’t work with a script and don’t attempt to fit dogs or people into categories. Our ultimate goal is to enhance the bond between people and their dogs by helping them communicate with each other.

As I tell our clients, you don’t need to learn the intricacies of applied behavioral science to communicate with your dog. Start by playing games with him, cuddling and being physical in other ways to learn his physical cues (and show him yours), paying attention to his likes and dislikes, and talking to him in different volumes and tones to see what he responds to.

Many people find that by interacting with their dog in these ways, a mutual understanding develops organically, and problem behaviors begin to disappear.

For example, your dog may tug at the leash to tell you he wants to walk on the left side of the road instead of the right. But if you’re focused on the idea that leash pulling is bad, you’ll miss that cue. Instead, you and your dog may work out a compromise that could be verbalized as: “I’ll let you choose which side of the street we walk on, but I expect you to stop pulling my arm out of its socket after we switch sides.”

You may even decide that some behaviors aren’t actual problems. If it doesn’t bother you that your dog licks your face in greeting, don’t be persuaded by what you read or see on TV that this is a behavior you must fix. You and your dog will be better off if you create your own criteria for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and focus your training on things that will help you live together harmoniously.

When it comes to training, keep in mind that there are different ways to mold dog behavior. Too often, people tell themselves, “I have to get tough with my dog.” But while a military-style dictatorial approach may persuade your dog to stop the behavior temporarily, it won’t enhance your mutual understanding.

The Pets for Life approach uses positive reinforcement to teach dogs what they should do instead of focusing on what they should not do. So, for example, if you don’t want your dog sleeping in your bed, instead of kicking him off, you can use treats and praise to persuade him that the plush dog bed on the floor is a fun, exciting place to be.

Likewise, you should approach each training session as another fun activity to share with your dog. No matter your goals, training is a chance to spend time together and enhance your communication. And the stronger your bond, the easier it will be to settle on a lifestyle that brings joy to both ends of the leash.

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