

Why Only One Command?

By Deb Mickey

At our obedience classes here at Fieldwood, instructors stress the importance of the students' dogs complying to a command the first time it is said. The students often look puzzled until we explain why that is so important. Let me see if I can explain it here.

Dogs and kids are a lot alike. For the most part, they rise to our expectations and if they know the rules, generally comply with them. Of course, they have minds of their own, and some are more likely than others to challenge or test our resolve, but for the most part they want to cooperate and go with the flow.

With that being the said, one of the differences is a dog never grows up. It seems dogs remain in the perpetual mindset of a 3- to 5-year-old child. And, because they live in a world mankind has created, they are unaware of the dangers. As their caretakers, their safety is always our concern.

This willingness to comply has to do not only with their respect for us but also with our willingness to reinforce what we say.

For their safety, dogs should comply with our direction on the first command. The one time they ignore us could be the one time something horrible happens. This is not a dictatorship with us the dictator; but our dogs need to understand they must do as we say, and this can be taught to them humanely.

Breed type and individual temperament play a part in whether our dog easily complies or readily blows us off. Some breeds of dogs were bred to work independent of humans and these breeds can be the most difficult. Other breeds will bend over backwards to please us. Dogs of mixed lineage can be a mystery bringing into play the mesh of their ancestry. Then, within each breed or litter, the individual will have its own personality. There will always be a leader, a bold one, a shy one, and one that just wants to get along with everybody.

The level of humane and effective training and the duration of the training the dog receives is an important part in our dogs' willingness to comply.

This willingness to comply has to do not only with their respect for us but also with our willingness to reinforce what we say. Even the most easy-going dog will take advantage of an owner who is inconsistent or lax in their expectations.

When we teach a dog something new, the reinforcement of the command is a positive experience for the dog. For example: luring the dog into the sit using food or a toy. The use of positive reinforcement techniques is a must when teaching a new behavior, but even at this stage we don't want the dog to hear the command without complying, even if it's by our manipulations of the reinforcer they comply.

Once the dog understands what the command means and what he needs to do to comply, we can wean away the treats and require the dog comply "just because we say so." We must be fair but insist that the dog comply the first time he hears *any* command he knows. But don't think that once the dog understands this, our job is over. Having a dog in our life is a commitment of 10 to 16 years and their willingness to comply with our direction is always under construction.

Kids and dogs *do* have a lot in common. In raising and living with them we must be consistent and fair in their treatment. They must know we love them. They need our guidance to remain safe. They need to know what our expectations are and how to achieve these expectations. They must know there are consequences to their actions and inactions. One of their differences is the child grows up and moves out. The dog is with us its entire life.

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just one way dogs and kids are the same