

HOW TO HAVE A CALMER DOG

By Joann M. Locher

It is true that genetics and early experiences are definite factors which influence an animal's behavior. However, an owner has control over so many things which determine what a dog will be like, that one can create an "ideal" pet, which is calm, stable, and well-mannered.

Seemingly insignificant things can contribute or detract from the dog you desire. For example, the way in which owners pet their dog can calm and build a bond, or hype and agitate, or even make the dog aggressive. A slow reach and slow hands are much better than grabbing at the dog in a "gotcha!" fashion. Using a calm speaking manner and low tones can make a dog more stable, whereas fast talking, a high pitch or loud volume can make the dog excited or nervous.

Canine aerobics, such as jogging, fetch or recall games, helps to vent stress and energy which might otherwise be used destructively. Two regular twenty-minute aerobic sessions per day, will make the dog calmer for the rest of the day.

John Rogerson, a canine behaviorist asserts: "Control the games, control the dog!" Too many people inadvertently teach rudeness and aggression by the way they play with the dog. Then these owners wonder why their dogs have bad habits or are disobedient. Through inappropriate games, dogs can learn negative behaviors and lose respect for their owners. Instead, games should be used to teach trust, proper social interaction, and build a bond between dog and owner.

Diet is another way to reduce hyperactivity. Give a greater percentage protein, which is metabolized more slowly than carbohydrates. This can be accomplished by mixing an egg, cheese, or canned dog food with the kibble, for young or hyper dogs, until they mature a bit. However, the protein level should not be elevated for a prolonged period, because it will place an undue burden on the liver and kidneys, which may shorten the dog's lifespan. Also, vitamin B complex can calm without tranquilizing.

Giving clear messages to the dog of what is expected, and consistently enforcing commands and rules, will eliminate unruliness. Being an untrained

dog must be much like living in a foreign country, with no understanding of the language or local laws. Such continuing confusion, as well as upsetting people all the time for reasons which the animal does not understand, must be very stressful. Owners often misinterpret this stress: "I can tell that the dog knows he did wrong by the guilty way that he acts when I come home!" Trained dogs typically seem calmer, and even happier than their untrained counterparts.

The dog's status in the family is a big factor. "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown." If a dog thinks he is the leader and protector of the household, he can never relax. It is a great responsibility for a dog to bear. Alternatively, a dog that has a competent, authoritative leader can be more laid back, knowing that the owner can handle any situation which arises. Your dog should be responsible to you, not responsible for you.

Also, a well-socialized dog is more stable, and therefore, safer to be around, than a dog which has had limited exposure to the outside world. The more dogs get to greet and interact with others, the more they learn to trust and relax. However, if they are on a tight leash during such encounters, they may feel like trapped victims, and become nervous.

Many of today's pets live on an emotional roller coaster: smothered with attention part of the day and then isolated the rest of the day. Such "isolation anxiety" can cause destructiveness, excessive barking, or escaping when the dog is left alone. Giving the dog his own bed and limiting touching can give the pet the emotional independence which will make him calmer in the owner's absence. Also providing a buddy, if the dog is alone a lot, will give him a happier, more normal life.

Dog owners can practically fashion the temperament of their choice. Even second-hand, problem dogs can be rehabilitated into very nice companions, if all of these factors which affect behavior are handled appropriately.