

Dog Training: Specific Tips for Specific Types of Dogs

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A Dog's Nature

Dogs are surprisingly complex creatures

Some official estimates of the number of breeds reaches as high as 800 in Western countries alone. Even given that distinguishing one breed from another can be carried to absurd extremes, the variety is astonishing from a human perspective, who have, perhaps, a dozen 'breeds'.

Complicating the picture still further is the well-known fact that dogs have descended from wolves but began domestic interaction with humans over 10,000 years ago. As a consequence, there are behaviors that develop regardless of circumstances and some that are as unique as the human the dog is paired with. Still, some common traits stand out.

Dogs are predators

That doesn't mean they necessarily hunt and attack every passing cat or rat, but the capacity is always in them. With acute hearing and head muscles that allow precise orientation of their ears, dogs can pick up a range of sounds and locate the source quickly and with high accuracy.

A dog's field of vision is higher than that of humans. Their field of view has been estimated from 180-270 degrees, by comparison to a human's 100-150 degrees, allowing them to track events better.

And, of course, there's that famous sense of smell. Citing figures such as having 25 times as many scent-receptor cells or being able to sense concentrations 100 million times smaller than humans conveys the fact one way.

Another is to report behavior. Golden Retrievers, for example, can smell gophers through two feet of packed snow and a foot of frozen earth. And, they'll dig through it to get to the gopher. That's predatory behavior.

Dogs are social animals

That's common knowledge, of course. But, though known, it's often ignored. Individuals will often lock a lone dog away in a garage or pen, or on a rope in the yard for long periods. This isolation from contact with humans and other animals invariably leads to fear and/or aggression and other forms of maladjustment. Dogs need companionship in order to develop healthy behavior.

Isolating a dog for brief periods can be a useful training technique. Fear of expulsion from the pack can move overly assertive, alpha-status seeking dogs into alignment with the trainer's

goals. In any human-dog pair, the human must be the alpha (leader). The alternative is property destruction, human frustration and unsafe conditions for people and dogs.

But excessive time devoid of social interaction with another dog, the human, or even a friendly cat harms the dog's psychology and leads to unwanted behavior. Even guard dogs have to be able to distinguish between external 'threats' and members of its own 'pack'.

Dogs are exploratory

Like the two-year-old humans at roughly their same mental level, dogs learn by exploring their environment. And like those humans, they can engage in destructive behavior. Dogs are no respecters of property. Training and an appropriately selected set of objects and suitable area can channel that behavior into something acceptable to humans and healthy for the dog.

Providing toys with characteristics very distinct from human property, such as rawhide bones rather than rubber balls that are hard to tell from children's, leads to less confusion and misbehavior. In many cases, however, the problem is solved by scent. The dog's toys may look like the child's, but smell very different.

Some amount of digging may be inevitable as part of the dog's exploration. Be prepared to patch holes in lawn if the dog is unsupervised for very long. Plants can usually be protected with cayenne pepper paste, bitter apple and other preparations.

Dogs are scavengers

Dogs will eat deer droppings, even when they have perfectly sound and ample diets. They'll chew on dead rats, eat grass and ingest a wide variety of things that their own experience shows causes upset stomachs. And they'll repeat the behavior day after day.

Acknowledging their limited ability to connect cause and effect when those are separated in time is a must in order to keep them healthy and safe.

Recognizing a dog's nature, and working within in it rather than against it leads to less frustration for both human and dog. Enjoying the beneficial aspects, such as spontaneous dog hugs (leaning into a leg), paw offering and a head laid on the lap are just a few of the rewards.

Dog Psychology

Even dumb dogs are clever. Just think of the many ways they get humans to do what they want. Few can resist the soulful eyes and the offered paw when eating something the dog also views as tasty.

One of the reasons for the many-thousand year association between humans and dogs is the latter's great capacity for communicating in terms the former can understand. How often has

your canine companion delivered a tennis ball with a look that you unerringly interpret as 'time for fetch'?

These are only two examples out of many that show dogs have a great capacity for learning complex behavior.

Dogs can understand a surprising amount of language and body posture, but they process information very differently from humans.

Their eyes respond very differently to colors and have a greater ability to see in low light. Their head muscles allow them to rotate their ears in order to quickly and accurately locate the precise source of sounds. And, of course, there's that famous sense of smell.

The differences continue on other levels of mental functioning. Dogs understand cause-effect relationships very unlike their human companions.

Classical conditioning - associating a stimulus with a response - can be much more readily surmounted in humans. Humans are much better at changing an undesired response to a car accident or a trip to the doctor. Those associations are much more persistent in dogs.

Operant conditioning - grasping naturally related cause-effect relationships, usually through positive and negative reinforcement - is even more different between the two species.

I always exit the rear door with my Golden Retrievers when we're going to play fetch. When I do, we invariably do actually play. By contrast, a hundred times I let them out the side door, where I never follow them. Instead, I leave them alone for half an hour or more. Yet they still go immediately to the back door where they expect a game to follow.

I clearly associated a specific tone and word and a unique hand gesture with every command. In consequence, they learn a wide variety of selected behaviors. They can sit, stay, down, come, roll-over, no-bite, fetch and release, even eliminate on command.

Yet telling them repeatedly not to eat things off the ground that their own experience continually shows them leads to upset stomachs is a waste of effort. They'll repeat the same unwanted behavior the first time they can. They simply can't grasp some effects when the cause is much earlier in time.

The lesson from these examples is this. Your companion, whether Retriever or Shepherd, Dachshund or Basset Hound can learn an astounding variety of things, provided you don't expect the unreasonable.

One woman well-known on the show circuit has trained her friend to perform a complex, several-minutes long dance routine. Search-and-rescue dogs have been trained to pull children from rivers and skiers from avalanches. Service dogs can open a door and pull a wheelchair or fetch a container of water without spilling a drop.

But don't expect them to think like humans, even when trained to emulate us. No matter how many times you tell them not to, they'll continue to eat grass.

Tips for Large and Small Dogs

No project, apart from raising a child, requires more patience than dog training. All breeds have different attributes that present challenges. Some are intelligent, but boisterous and easily distracted. Some are eager to please, but dim-witted. But special considerations are required for size.

Small dogs are easily transported, providing more choices for a training area around the home or away from it. But they tend to bark more readily and are often either too fearful or too bold. Extra effort directed toward bark suppression is often required.

As with any training regimen, start young and train regularly. Be sure to establish early on your 'alpha' (leader of the pack) status. Respond firmly to any challenge. Don't give in to 'cuteness'.

When leash training a smaller dog be especially careful to correct sideways on the neck (by jerk, tug or restraint) rather than back. When the dog pulls forward, jerk sideways to correct and inform, not to punish. Even a small dog has strong neck muscles, but also has an easily bruised throat.

Be careful not to apply excessive pressure on the hindquarters when encouraging a sit. Small dogs are sturdy, but the size difference between it and you makes it too easy to force when you want to direct.

Large dogs, too, come with inherent challenges. As the weight/strength ratio between trainer and dog tips in favor of the dog, several considerations come into play.

The first is - always be alert. A small dog that tugs on the leash unexpectedly can be annoying, a large one can be dangerous. If a German Shepherd, Rottweiler, Rhodesian Ridgeback, or even a larger breed chooses to jet after a cat you need to be prepared to resist.

Select at least an inch thick leash of good nylon or leather. Make sure his collar is wide and equipped with quality fasteners that won't break under tension. When walking, grasp the loop at the end of the leash in your right hand and insert your thumb through the loop.

Then take a few inches of the leash to your left and fold and drape them over your left palm. Insert your left hand's thumb through the little loop formed. Clamp the leash across your left palm. (For right handed people, walking with the dog on the left. Reverse directions as needed.)

As with small dogs, perform corrections by jerking sideways, not back. Their throats, too, can be bruised by excessive force. Just jerk and release. It also helps put them momentarily off balance.

Large dogs, even socialized ones, will sometimes go after small children. Whether they see them as prey or as someone their size to play with it's sometimes hard to tell. Take care not to allow jumping. Always be prepared with leash corrections, until training reaches the stage where they will reliably respond to pure voice commands.

Large dogs can much more easily jump fences, and just as often fail to clear one cleanly. When they clear it, you have a potential lawsuit, when they don't you may have a vet bill. They'll rarely break a bone this way, but it's common to get scrapes on the belly which the dog will turn into hot spots - raw patches of skin - requiring treatment.

In either case, make sure that barriers are high and sturdy. Even the best trained dog will sometimes respond to instinct and go after a cat or other dog.

Both large and small dogs need daily training to learn and reinforce guidelines about what is or isn't acceptable behavior. But in both cases the rewards are safer and more loving pets. Dogs like clear, consistent rules and need to know who is the leader and who the follower. You should be the first, the dog the latter.

Purebred Training

The term 'purebred' is relative. No breed has been so isolated that it's never mated with another.

But taken over the last hundred years or so, there are populations of Golden Retriever, German Shepherds and many others that have bred only with their own kind. As with any inbreeding program, the results tend to produce extremes, both good and bad.

The bad aspect is that, for technical reasons, genes that lead to undesirable conditions will occur more frequently the narrower the population. Instances of hip dysplasia in Golden Retrievers are more likely to be passed on if programs are careless. Fortunately, they rarely are.

The other extreme produces show dogs or simply companions that tend to have a higher capacity for learning and stronger bodies. But even in these 'better' types, training is challenging.

Along with superior physical capacity comes the confidence to tackle larger obstacles, the need for more interaction, and - there's no other way to put it - a more finicky character. Mutts, on the whole, are more relaxed than purebreds.

As a consequence, be prepared to commit extra time and attention to the standard 'sit', 'stay', 'come' basics. Expect a greater capacity for attention, but also a higher likelihood of willfulness. Purebreds tend to be more independent.

Both mixed and purebreds love exercise and play. But the purebred will often want to play 'his' way. Increased repetition and a refusal to compromise will help you maintain and reinforce your alpha (leader) status. Fortunately, as can be seen from show trials on television, purebreds can exhibit a wide variety of complex behavior flawlessly.

That behavior comes, though, from the many hours over many months or years of focused training. A superior potential is just that - a capacity. To bring out that capacity, focus on the dog's strengths.

One well-known woman on the show circuit has trained her companion to perform a complex dance routine lasting several minutes. The dog backs up, shoots through her legs, winds around in a circle, and much more but always in a pattern. Taking what would be random movements and turning them into choreography requires breaking down the routine into short segments.

Focus on a specific, say moving backwards as you move forward. Face the dog, who starts in a sit position. Then 'up' and step forward. Even highly intelligent dogs don't spontaneously back up on command. Encourage the behavior by holding a treat or toy above the head and slightly beyond the eyes, moving forward in steps.

Try one step, then two, then six, then twelve. Repeat the exercise daily until the dog has it completely automated and executes flawlessly.

Accompany your movement with a unique tone and word combination. Praise lavishly for correct execution and display firm patience, not harsh condemnation, for errors.

Consistency will eventually lead to the desired results.

Training Non-Neutered Dogs

Not every dog gets spayed (removal of female reproductive organs) or neutered (removal of male organs). Whether through an intention to breed or other motive, many individuals leave their companions intact. Left with a full complement of nature's hormones, these dogs can react differently than their surgically altered counterparts.

Males with the normal amount of testosterone tend to be prone to seek alpha (leader) status, and when exposed to a female in heat will often ignore commands. Licking behavior increases, the male will gently head butt a female in the neck, and eventually try to mount.

Separated from the female, they'll exhibit rapid breathing and pacing, often going without eating for two days or more. They'll often even refuse water after hours of not drinking.

Females left unaltered will experience a menstrual cycle about twice per year. During that roughly three week interval, there's an increased tendency to wander and a greater willingness to accept the attention of strange dogs. Previously passive females will dig under a fence and display their hind parts with tails lifted to males of almost any breed.

Getting compliance to commands during these times is difficult, but not always impossible. If you've consistently retained the alpha (leader) role in the 'pack', you have a say in who mates

who when. You'll need to be especially assertive during these times, but even excited males will obey up to a point.

Even outside of mating periods, un-neutered males will typically exhibit a stronger push toward dominance, especially in the first year or two. The counter for this is simply a refusal to accept anything less than alpha status. But far from being harsh, there are several alternatives.

Most dogs love to play. Distracting that assertive male with a tennis ball, a short rope or other favorite toy decreases tension on both sides of the equation. You control the ball, you hand out or take away the toy, and you ensure compliance with your wishes by leash, treat and firm voice command. All these help remind the dog that you're in charge.

When leash training or walking, these assertive males will have a stronger tendency to pull ahead. To counter this, keep the leash a couple of inches BEHIND you. If the dog strains at the leash, initiate a sharp, firm jerk to the right (NOT back) accompanied by a strong 'HEEL'. That assumes the dog walks on your left and the leash is held in your left hand, as is usually the case. Reverse directions as needed.

Unless your dog is very small this won't injure them. Dogs have very strong neck muscles. The goal is to put them off balance and to control, not to punish.

Untreated dogs require extra patience - as if the normal amount weren't already enormous. But they're also less likely to be fearful in stressful situations and more willing to take risks. For people with certain lifestyles who enjoy taking their friend with them, that can be a big plus.

Training Assertive Dogs

As descendants from wolf packs, dogs have and seek a natural hierarchy in which some are dominant (alphas) and others follow. Struggles among young pups to sort of who is which start early, in some cases three weeks after birth.

Apart from human society, wild dogs will fight - sometimes to the death - to maintain or achieve the alpha status. Losers are occasionally expelled from the pack entirely.

But in any human-dog pair the human has to take the leader role. The alternative is property destruction, human frustration and usually a maladjusted dog. Naturally, that's sometimes easier said than done.

Pups display early in life the tendency to want to lead or acceptance of a subsidiary role. For those who insist on being alpha, several techniques can help adjust the dog's behavior. But first you have to identify it.

Put the pup on its back with a firm hand placed in the middle of the chest. No need to press hard, just enough to keep the dog from wiggling away. Monitor the strength and length of time the dog takes to submit, signaled by pulled back paws, averted eyes, and general relaxing.

Most individuals will struggle at the unfamiliar position and submissive role. The strength of the struggle and the length to relaxation will vary from breed to breed - Golden Retrievers may submit relatively quickly, where terriers may never stop struggling.

Dogs learn by cue and repetition so to assist curing excessive assertiveness lean your face close to the dog's and growl, bark or even shout when required. Don't expect completely satisfactory results the first few times, but gradually most will learn to accept their secondary role.

A variation has the person stand or kneel in front of the dog, then lift it at the chest using one or two hands. Most dogs, especially dominant ones, dislike this but they quickly learn who's the boss. Alternatively, grasp both front paws and lift up. Don't be too aggressive. The goal is to encourage acceptance of their role, not to punish.

For those inclined to leap up on people, there are several useful techniques.

First, try to distinguish between dominance and the desire for affection. Many dogs leap in order to get closer to the human face. Eye contact and face rubbing is used by them to encourage bonding and establish social roles. They may just be trying to communicate. Kneel down and allow non-biters to get close to the face.

Maintain enough eye contact to establish dominance by waiting for them to look away. Try not to blink. When the dog accepts its role, praise lavishly with ear rubs and leaning your forehead into the dog's head. Keep your head higher until your role is well-established.

For those who need extra discouragement, try the following.

Watch the dog's face and body carefully for tell-tale signs signaling an imminent jump. Discourage the behavior with voice commands ('stay' or 'down') and a palm thrust out and down into the dog's face. If they're already in mid-flight, raise a knee slightly into the dog's chest. To keep them off and put them off-balance, NOT to pummel the dog or throw it backwards, except in emergencies.

Establishing the alpha role takes patience and commitment and repetition. Assertive dogs will test you throughout their lifetimes. Be prepared to defend your role.

Training Passive Dogs

Like humans, dogs are individuals. Some, through a combination of genetics, circumstances and self-development display assertive characteristics and others are more passive.

Assertive dogs seek alpha (leader) status, forcibly remove rawhide bones or toys from others, try to enter doors first and are generally more demanding of attention. Passive dogs - either with, without or despite training - will tend to eat last, enter last and wait to be noticed.

At first blush, it may not appear that passive dogs really require much training since much of it takes the form of restraining dogs from unwanted behavior. Assertive dogs are leashed and corrected when they pull ahead during a walk or training exercise. Assertive dogs are taught not to rush out the door after every passing cat. Even fetch and release is often more a matter of redirecting behavior than encouraging it.

By contrast, passive dogs spontaneously wait to exit after others and show less tendency to dig, chase cats and perform other unwanted behaviors. Passive dogs will often separate themselves a short distance from other dogs in the house.

But some passive behavior is undesirable and can even put the dog at risk. Willingness to allow any stranger to approach unchallenged can, unfortunately, sometimes be an unsafe practice. Accepting treats from anyone who offers can be bad for the diet or even dangerous. There are, regrettably, sick people who will poison a dog or steal it this way.

Teach the passive dog that boundaries need to be respected both by the dog and unknown humans. Discourage treat taking from people you meet only once. Paranoia would be misplaced, but you're training the dog not judging every stranger.

To optimize your chance of success, as with any dog, work with the dog's nature not against it. Even passive dogs enjoy play and welcome rewards. 'Passive' and 'fearful' are not the same thing.

If you have multiple dogs, take the less assertive one out by itself from time to time. That way the only more dominant member of the pack nearby is you. Allow and encourage it to enter the house first occasionally. Feed it while the others are not around sometimes. When multiple dogs are fed together, ensure the passive one is not chased away from food.

Find one or more objects the dog enjoys - a favored stuffed cotton ball or rope or a beef-treated rawhide bone, for example. Perform the same 'sit' then 'up' maneuver with the dog you would with any other, but don't keep it waiting as long as you would a more assertive dog. A more encouraging, friendly voice is helpful, too.

Passive behavior is, to some extent, unchangeable - either physiological/genetic or 'chosen' (to the extent dogs have free will). Expectations about modifying the behavior of passive dogs shouldn't be too high. Nevertheless, with patience and persistence some degree of change is possible.

As with any training program, consistency and commitment are key. Expect to have to devote an hour a day for some weeks or months to encouraging a particular habit. Don't give up at the first or even the tenth failure.

Training Older Dogs

Of course, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' is a myth. Like humans, or many other species, dogs learn new things every day throughout life. My ten-year old Golden is still mentally alert and eager to 'play' in new ways.

But, also like humans, learning new behavior is often as much a matter of unlearning old ways. Dogs do have a strong tendency toward habits, and modifying or extending those habits after years of repetition takes extra patience and focused guidance.

Physical limitations should always be taken into account. The three-year-old dog has a huge capacity for running, jumping, retrieval, obstacle course maneuvers and so forth. The older dog may still want to do all those things, even learning new configurations, but tires more easily and loses interest more rapidly.

Take training sessions in shorter time chunks and expect to carry out many more repetitions. Make obstacles lower and runs shorter. Throw the ball two or three times, rather than twenty. Hearing loss occurs in dogs, too. Don't assume they're ignoring you when far away and facing away.

Allow for longer recovery periods between sessions. An active game of fetch is still a possible source of enjoyment, but keep in mind the dog will often want to go longer than is safe or healthy. Ligaments get stretched more readily and injuries more likely if you over do it.

Restrain food rewards for older dogs. The desire to reward an older dog for a new behavior is even more pronounced than for younger dogs, of whom we expect more. But older dogs can also more easily be 'over treated'. They gain weight more readily and shed pounds slower.

As with younger dogs, consistency is still essential. Specific play periods that begin and end around the same time of day help cue the dog. Similar areas for specific activities help provide a sense of familiarity as background for new lessons.

When working with my Golden's the backyard is for tennis ball fetch, the forest never. But that fetch behavior in the yard can be extended to the forest to retrieve fallen deer antlers.

Conversely, digging - a natural behavior in many breeds, almost impossible to eradicate entirely - can be channeled into harmless areas even in older dogs.

For those not lucky enough to have a forest in the backyard, a ten-by-twelve foot area of the pen or yard where the dog is allowed to indulge can help release the urge. The boundary can be marked by variation in scent or ground composition. Even older dogs can learn what is theirs to play with and what isn't and their sense of smell remains keen.

Focus more on building on the dog's existing strengths, since older dogs are less malleable. One individual will be excellent at fetch and release, the other more inclined to hang onto the ball. One does well with a Frisbee, the other never gets the hang of it. Rather than force desired behavior, work with each one's unique nature.

The dog more inclined to hang onto a ball is a good candidate for learning to pull a wagon by a rope. The better 'fetch and release' dog can more easily be taught to get a plastic food container. Handy things, since trainers get older too.

Training Rescued Dogs

Normal dog training requires patience that is greater nowhere else but childrearing. Training rescued dogs takes even more.

Though sterilizing dogs - spaying (removing female organs) and neutering (removing male organs) - has been common practice for decades, birth rates continue to outpace ownership. Add to that a percentage who are lost or wander away and the problem grows larger.

The inevitable result is a large number of dogs who often end in facilities where they're either adopted or terminated.

But, some of these unfortunate animals get a second chance. Either picked up off the street or taken home from shelters they find homes with compassionate and committed individuals who want to help them achieve a decent life. Such caring people can find themselves with more than they bargained for.

Rescued animals have often been physically and mentally abused by former owners, or experienced horrendous conditions before being found. Sometimes, because of impatient or unrealistic owners who found their temperament undesirable, they were simply released to get by as best they could.

Even wild dogs don't do well isolated from a pack. Untrained dogs, on their own with no other to teach them, fare even worse. But with patience and skill such animals can usually be trained to at least tolerate touching, to refrain from barking at the slightest provocation.

The first step is restoring physical health. Get the dog a thorough examination. No animal is going to be amenable to learning if it's diseased or the training is painful. Any malnutrition, common in rescued dogs, must first be overcome.

Try to obtain any history. Often this will be impossible, but knowing about any past abuse, temperament or medical history and general conditions is helpful.

Next, try to establish trust slowly. Don't force physical contact on the dog. Offer inducements to let them seek it from you. At first, instead of offering a treat at close range to a potential biter lay the treat on the floor then step back several feet. Praise the dog lavishly for taking it.

When you've worked up to physical contact, which happily some will seek immediately, try rolling them over and placing a hand on the chest. Aggressive dogs will resist and passive dogs will accept this fearfully. Neither response is desirable. Unlike normal training, don't immediately

force the aggressive to accept a secondary role. Take it slow. For the fearful, provide a belly rub and soothing tone to show that being on their backs is not a prelude to punishment.

Rescued dogs tend to be older, mixed breed, have temperament difficulties and come from painful circumstances. All these tend to work against the dog learning the usual range of desired behaviors, and generally more slowly. Some conditions are such that full recovery never occurs.

Exercise even greater patience and care, but don't let the dog run the household. Even with rescued dogs it's important that the human be the alpha (leader).

The reward of the greater expense in dollars and time is often a completely devoted and loving companion. Even dogs can exhibit gratitude toward kindness.

Specialized Training: Tests

It's no accident that some breeds are more commonly found as working dogs. Retrievers, Shepherds and a few others tend to have the physical characteristics, intelligence and temperament needed to perform the complex behaviors even they need several years to master.

Specialized training for service, assistance or even therapy dogs begins before birth and continues for several years after.

After the pups have matured a few weeks to a few months, selector-trainers run a series of tests to determine stamina, aptitude and overall personality. Candidates first receive a thorough physical to check for diseases or potentially debilitating conditions such as hip dysplasia or weak joints. Then come the personality tests.

Alpha or Omega?

Dogs are social animals with a natural hierarchy. Through in-built characteristics and early circumstances they take on varying roles from alpha (leader) to beta (second in command) to omega (submissive, sometimes on the periphery of the pack).

In any human-dog pair, the human must always take the alpha role, but service dogs still need to have a fair amount of assertiveness to perform their duties. A common indicator for this is the dominance-submission test.

Puppies six to twelve weeks old are placed on their backs and the evaluator places a hand on its chest. They observe to what degree the puppy protests being placed in that submissive, vulnerable position and how long the dog struggles before pulling back its paws and tilting its head to indicate surrender.

Variations involve having the dog stand on all four with the evaluator in front. The person then lifts the dog by the chest and monitors how much the dog struggles and for how long.

Dogs that are too assertive may never make suitable working dogs since they'll tend to ignore commands. Dogs that are too passive will also be poor candidates, since they need the confidence to take on the role of guide, rescuer or some other requiring some initiative and risk-taking.

Noise Sensitivity

Working dogs are often placed in noisy, potentially distracting environments. The average canine would react fearfully or playfully to all the stimulus, but working dogs need to focus on a task.

To test for the dog's potential, evaluators clap hands in front of the face or near the ears, bang pots together, rattle chains and so on. Preferred candidates will exhibit a curious sniff. Frightened running and hiding or excessive barking flunks the dog before they pass freshman class.

Foreign Objects

Many working dogs have to deal with a variety of objects large and small that others might find intimidating. Be they moving cars and equipment or simply coat racks, curiosity signaled by approach and sniffing followed by acceptance is needed. Fear of the unknown puts them out of the working dog category.

Stamina

Service dogs need to ford rivers, open doors, hurdle obstacles, herd sheep or cattle and be on the go for long periods. Some breeds and individual dogs naturally have a higher capacity and even eagerness for long periods of activity. Testing the dog's reaction to or willingness to surmount a board or pole is just the first test among many to test for stamina.

Motivation

The most essential characteristic for any working dog is the desire to work. Like humans, individual dogs vary in their eagerness to carry out assigned tasks. A variety of exercises test the intelligence and willingness to jump an obstacle, retrieve an object, return on command, focus on a task and so forth.

Dogs that are quick to learn and eager to please demonstrate the motivation to take on the complex roles performed by service dogs.

Specialized Training: Assistance Dogs

Once upon a time, seeing-eye (guide) dogs were almost the only type of assistance dog around. Over the last few decades, the field has widened considerably.

Today, dogs help the hearing impaired, the blind, wheelchair bound and bedridden. Others simply provide a new kind of therapy for prisoners, burn victims, the clinically depressed or merely home bound.

Training starts before birth by careful selection. It's no accident that certain breeds tend to be more useful for these roles than others. German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, and a few others are favored both for intelligence and temperament.

Even within breeds some individual dogs are more keen on training than others. They display not only the ability to perform a simple task on command, but a confidence and eagerness that's essential to the job.

After a year of in-house training and bonding with a person who also receives special training, the dog 'graduates' to the next level. Then, depending on the intended role, they receive an additional two months to two years of intensive, specialized instruction.

Dogs in these programs learn everything from simple barking to alert the deaf to a door knock or telephone ring to fetching containers of food or drink, opening doors, and - of course - providing vision-information to the sightless.

A seeing-eye guide dog may lead their blind companion around obstacles on the street or at the mall. The hearing-guide dog may alert their friend to an oncoming fire truck. The wheelchair assistant may even help the occupant off the floor or into bed.

These special animals are trained to stay focused in crowds and deal with varying environments. Some go to urban areas where they're used to see a curb as a boundary, others find homes in rural areas where they learn that turning on a garden hose is more important than chasing a fox from the property. Try teaching that to Chauncy the terrier some time! Possible, but not easy.

Besides the traditional sit, stay, come these working dogs must learn to jump on command to deliver a cup of water without spilling to a paraplegic. They turn on or off lights, change the volume on the stereo, and bring bags containing medicines. Some are even trained to recognize and react to heart attacks and strokes and call 911!

Learning such beyond-the-norm behaviors takes months of dedicated concentration by both trainer and dog. Patience beyond what most individuals possess is required to teach even the most willing students.

Dogs learn by cue and repetition. Though they can learn to recognize sounds and grasp simple meanings, they don't possess even the three-year old humans understanding of language. Teaching them to associate the sound 'water' with 'fetch me a cup' is many times more difficult than for the average toddler.

Yet these amazing creatures, with the guidance of their talented and dedicated trainers, learn to carry out a range of behavior well beyond their peers. So, when you see one accompanying its partner, respect the sign they carry that says 'Working. Please don't distract'.

Just give a silent bow of admiration to these hard-working dogs and the dedicated people who train them.

Specialized Training: Service Dogs

And you thought normal dog training was difficult. Sit, stay, down, come, heel... all require weeks or more of dedicated trainer and dog effort to master. Now, consider the months or years needed to train a police, search and rescue, guide or other service dog.

Training these special animals starts with careful selection. It's no accident that certain breeds - German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers and others - tend to be selected. Others may be just as loving as pets, but don't usually have the physical characteristics nor temperament needed to carry out the wide range of complex behavior these working dogs perform.

Even within breeds some individuals early on display an aptitude for the rigorous training, while others are dropped from the program or moved into different areas. Assertiveness is needed, but not aggression. Except in emergencies and on command only. Confidence is essential, but not willfulness. Strength is important, but intelligence is key.

Once selected, trainers deepen the bonds needed to build trust and perform on command. Police, search and rescue and even guide dogs can easily find themselves in dangerous situations. Like humans, such individuals don't always spontaneously put themselves in harm's way. Some though, with proper training, will take on challenges even trained and athletic humans would think twice about undertaking.

Search and rescue dogs, for example, have been known to ford freezing rivers to snatch and extract drowning children. Others have pulled half-buried avalanche victims from otherwise certain death, while the ice cracks beneath their canine feet.

Training consists of a year or more of acclimatization in the trainer's home or facility to learn basic commands and trust. Once the animal is certified as trainable, the real effort begins.

Depending on the job, service dogs receive from 6 to 18 months of additional training, spending hours per day in special instruction. Sometimes the behaviors taught are those you wouldn't want your average pet to learn.

Everything from simple light switch flipping to pulling open doors to fording water, locating buried objects and more are covered. Service dogs learn to tolerate gun shots, avoid obstacles, remain calm and focused on the task in crowds. They may learn to aggressively protect the handler while being gentle with victims.

Some of these extraordinary creatures learn to tolerate smoke, run through burning buildings or even chase vehicles; exactly what you wouldn't want Charles the Chihuahua to do.

Less dangerous, but no less important tasks are taught to other categories of service dogs.

Seeing-eye or hearing (guide) dogs assist sightless or deaf persons to carry out daily tasks safely and more conveniently. Whether guiding the blind or wheelchair bound through a shopping mall, fetching a container of food or drink, or just answering the doorbell these assistants prove their worth every day.

So, next time you see one of those working dogs at the mall or on the street, remember they ARE working. They're carrying out needed chores for which they've been intensively trained. Let them carry out those important duties and just say a silent 'thanks' to them and their trainers for a job well done.

Training Show Dogs

Over 130 different breeds compete in major dog shows, such as the Westminster in the US or Crufts in the UK. But there's a good deal more to developing a show dog than simply acquiring a dog of one of those breeds and teaching it to sit or stay.

Within any breed there are dogs that are closer to the 'ideal' than others. This 'conformation' is an important first criteria. Conformation refers to the specific arrangement of parts - legs, tail, head, ears, etc - that determine the dog's appearance. Since this is difficult to judge in young puppies, show dogs are often the offspring of other show dogs.

Once you have a fine example in hand, you're ready to begin a dedicated training regimen. Daily for several months or years, the trainer teaches the dog 'the basics' and then more advanced behaviors. Sit, stay, heel, and so on are covered, of course, but with a keener eye toward precision than usual.

A show dog has to hit a mark (a specific spot in a show ring), pose ('stack') exactly, and walk in tune with its handler. And all this with thousands of people watching.

As with any training, begin young. Along with the basic behaviors, you'll need to teach the dog to be calm in the face of much handling. Judges will inspect eyes, teeth and other body parts along with the coat and general posture.

Bathing is one of the best ways to begin this process. Teach the dog to enjoy having its feet moved, its gums exposed, ears fondled and so forth. This should be pleasurable for the dog and fun for you. If you can teach them to defer shaking vigorously when wet, you're on your way!

During and after the bath, practice posing ('stacking'). Four feet on the ground, one foot raised, standing and sitting, and other postures will all be needed. In every case the dog should hold the pose precisely and for as long as you wish.

When you leash train the dog to walk, the goal is to get them to follow you precisely whichever way you choose to go at any given second. Start with normal walking/heeling, but move on to sharp direction changes as soon as possible.

To encourage the dog to follow use a clicker when executing a change, or give a quick, sharp tug and release on the leash. Of course, the tug should be in the direction you go. At all times the dog should be directly at your side, never ahead or behind.

Graduate to walking on a very loose leash. Before long the dog should be able to follow along at a brisk pace and sense immediately when you change direction. Then it should turn as you do and resume the 'at the side' position.

Gradually increase the speed of the walk until you work up to a slow trot.

Just as important is to stop at the precise moment you do. With clicker or tug and release, the dog can quickly learn to follow your lead. Go when you go, stop when you stop. And for as long as you stop or walk. Before long only the lightest indication by the leash should be required.

As with any training, lavish praise and a sense of enjoying the activity is enormously helpful. Show dogs, though some are temperamental, almost universally get great enjoyment from the activity. You should too, otherwise the large investment of time and money - you'll discover quickly - will not be worth it.