



Training is about trust and relationships. (Photo by Elizabeth Dodd)

Chapter 1

Dogs Just Want to Have Fun

So you're going to train your dog. At least you're thinking about training, or you wouldn't be reading this book. Congratulations! You are taking an important step toward ensuring that you and your dog will share a lifetime of fun, companionship, love, and respect. If you make a firm commitment to training your dog, you'll have a loyal friend for life—and you could be saving your dog's.

From 1995 to 1996, the National Council on Pet Overpopulation conducted a study to determine why dogs are surrendered to shelters and found that 96 percent of the dogs given up by their owners had not received any obedience training. Sadly, millions of potentially great dogs are euthanized at animal shelters in the United States every year simply because no one took the time to train them. But you can make sure this doesn't happen to *your* dog.

Great dogs don't happen by accident. When you see an owner playing in the park with a dog who is playful and exuberant, yet at the same time attentive, responsive, and obedient, you can be sure that the owner has spent lots of quality time with his dog. When you train your dog, you establish a powerful bond that helps to cement the relationship. This bond is the critical difference between an unfortunate dog who ends up at a shelter because her owner is moving and can't keep her and a dog whose owner would live in his car or on the street before he would consider giving up his faithful four-legged friend. Every dog has the power to be great. Will yours? It's up to you. Both you and your dog bring the power to succeed in the training adventure. You bring the power to teach; your dog brings the power and eagerness to learn what you teach.

Few couples get married intending to divorce later on. By the same token, no one adopts a dog with the intention of getting rid of her several weeks, months, or years down the road. When you adopt a dog, you enter into a social contract, whether you buy one from a breeder, find a stray on the street, rescue a puppy from a cardboard box in front of the supermarket, or select a homeless hound from the local shelter. You agree to provide for your dog's needs for the rest of her life in exchange for her companionship and unconditional love. Given that unconditional love is pretty hard to come by in this world, you're getting the better end of this bargain, by far!

If you want to uphold your part of the contract, you must teach your dog the social skills necessary for her to adapt to the human world. You need to teach her good manners. Training takes a commitment of time and energy, but it's easier—and more fun—than you might think.

So why don't more people train their dogs? Surely everyone wants a well-mannered canine companion, and a new dog owner's intentions are usually good. Many dog owners make a genuine effort to train their dogs, only to give up because they find that training is more work or harder than they had expected.

Training, however, can be fun. Learning how to communicate with your dog can be a joyful and awe-inspiring experience of mutual empowerment. It doesn't have to feel like work, especially now that a whole new generation of dog trainers are teaching with positive reinforcement methods.

Positive reinforcement training opens the door to your dog's mind. It gives you and your dog the keys to understanding each other's alien cultures. By receiving rewards for desired behaviors, your dog learns how to choose to do the right thing, rather than just how to avoid doing the wrong thing. She learns how to think. As you train your dog, you create a relationship based on trust and understanding. You will also be thrilled and amazed by your dog's unlimited learning potential and positive attitude. She can learn at the speed of light, and, if you choose to teach her, you will realize that she is capable of performing incredibly complex behaviors. If you want to use positive methods to train your dog for the precision of obedience ring competition, high-speed agility, or canine freestyle competitions, you can do that, too. Both of you will have loads of fun in the process.

Once upon a time, I trained dogs using traditional "jerk and pull" choke-chain methods. And I was good at it. My dogs won competitions, achieving scores in the upper 190s out of a possible perfect 200 points. My teachers insisted that a little pain was necessary and a small price for my dogs to pay in order to ensure that they would be well-behaved, good canine citizens. I believed them.

Then I learned about positive training methods. I discovered that I don't have to hurt my dogs to teach them. I crossed over to the positive side of training. Whether you have never trained a dog before, or you, too, are thinking about becoming a crossover trainer, you are about to embark on an amazing journey. Open your eyes, your mind, and your heart. Sign on the dotted line of your canine social contract, make a commitment to having fun, and get ready to discover your dog. That's the power of positive dog training.

