

Chapter 1

WHAT IS THE BOND?

Beth threw up her hands and huffed, “This dog hates me.” *Hate?* Not exactly. Daisy, Beth’s dog, hadn’t acted the slightest bit angry toward her. In fact, Daisy was sitting placidly at my feet, panting, smiling, and having a grand time practicing sits and downs. I couldn’t detect a speck of hate in the Standard Poodle before me. She was a perfectly lovely dog.

But Beth was half-right. Something was off between dog and owner, and it hung in the air like last night’s party. It was enough to make Beth downright angry, and me somewhat embarrassed. I tried laughing off Daisy’s strange behavior, but Beth wasn’t having it. “I feed her, I walk her, I pet her—but she’s ignoring me! Why does Daisy like *you* better?!”

Ouch.

Beth had contacted me because Daisy constantly “blew her off” and didn’t listen to her. We were in the middle of our second training session of six, and I had to admit that Beth was right. Daisy was excelling at her sit-stays, downs, and recalls—for *me*. And that was the problem. Daisy acted as if Beth weren’t even in the room during our lesson.

Beth waved a piece of hot dog in front of her dog’s nose, “See! I have them, too!” and asked for a basic sit, only to have Daisy turn her back on Beth and walk over to me.

Every dog trainer has a little bit of Doctor Dolittle in them, no matter how hard we try to avoid anthropomorphizing. I couldn’t help but fall prey to it yet again with Daisy. Every time she looked at me, she seemed to be saying, “You understand me. You make sense. *Thank you.*”

I thought a change of venue might make things more pleasant for all of us—the tension was thick inside—so we suited up to go for a walk. Unfortunately, the leash walk was worse. After I convinced Beth to let me walk Daisy without a choke collar—a training tool that I consider outdated and unnecessary—I demonstrated my technique with inspiring results. Daisy was a fabulous walker! She matched her pace to mine and glanced up at me every so often as if to say, “Am I doing this right?” I paid her with tasty treats

every few steps to assure her that she was right on track. Once I was confident that Daisy had grasped the basic loose-leash walking concept, I turned the leash over to Beth. “My last trainer told me to keep the leash tight and make sure that Daisy walks at least two steps behind me. Why didn’t you mention anything about that?”

“Well,” I said, “leash walking should be fun for both of you. Keeping the leash tight and making Daisy walk right beside you turns what could be a pleasant stroll into a military drill. Casual loose-leash walking allows her to sniff the pee-mail and check out the neighborhood goings-on, which is all she really wants to do.”

“But my last trainer said. . . .” And the pattern continued while Daisy tripped, pulled, and ignored Beth. I asked for the leash again, and Daisy immediately fell in step near me, looking at me every so often in the hopes of getting a much-deserved hot dog. “Why doesn’t she do that for *me*?” Beth asked angrily.

“This is going to be a long six weeks,” I thought to myself.

Because I do private lessons in my clients’ homes, I’m able to pick up a great deal of background information about the relationship between dog and person before the lessons even begin. I start the training process by doing a quick Q&A with my clients, but I get just as much information from watching the interactions between them during our initial conversation as I do from the interview portion of the meeting. I noticed a problem between Beth and Daisy as soon as I met them, but I never dreamed that Daisy’s inattentiveness to Beth would hobble the training process as dramatically as it did. While I was there, the dog wanted nothing to do with Beth. Daisy happily performed each exercise with me, but when it was Beth’s turn, Daisy walked away. “Oh, this is *normal*!” I tried to joke, “I’m the Hot Dog Lady. It’s not me that she loves—it’s what’s in my pocket!” However, it was clear to both of us that something wasn’t right between dog and guardian. The problem was compounded by the fact that Daisy’s snubs absolutely enraged her person. Beth acted like a jilted girlfriend—petulant, jealous, and overbearing—every time Daisy ignored her, which only drove Daisy farther away from her person. It’s hard to avoid playing amateur psychiatrist in these situations, and all I could think was, “Issues, issues, issues,” as I tried to salvage the lesson.

Beth quit training with me after the third session, and I guiltily admit that I was happy. However, I felt terrible for Daisy, the clever, sweet dog who clearly needed an ally. Sure, I could tell that there was some sort of relationship problem between dog and owner, but aside from offering standard obedience-training advice, I’d done nothing to solve it. The concept of the bond began to percolate in my brain.

The Beth-and-Daisy debacle certainly wasn’t the first time I had dealt with a relationship-challenged duo. When I began my training career, I thought relationship problems like inattentiveness were obedience issues. The dog wouldn’t come when called and pulled like a sled-dog on leash. Dog-friendly training will save the day, right? Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

When it didn't, it always seemed that something was off between dog and owner. There was a lack of spark between them—but how could I describe *lack of spark* to a frustrated dog owner without sounding like a kook? Most of the time, the owner didn't even realize that there *was* a bond problem. The owner thought she had a disobedient dog—a “bad” dog—but never looked at the relationship with her dog as a two-way street. I struggled to understand why there was no spark in these dicey pairs. How and why did these relationships go off the rails?

Happily, I also work with an equal number of inspirational dog-human pairs. Robert and his Bichon Frise puppy, Cody, really won my heart. I was concerned when I first met Robert, because he was older than my average client, and senior clients who have trained dogs in the past are used to a harsher, more traditional type of training. But Robert took to my dog-friendly methods quickly, and both he and Cody became star students. Each week when I arrived I was treated to “The Cody and Robert Extravaganza,” which was basically five minutes of the two of them showing off everything they had practiced during the week. At the third lesson, after Robert had given me Cody's weekly progress update, he smiled and said, “Watch this.”

He looked at Cody and said, “Bed!” Cody leapt up, did an about-face in the air, ran down the hall, and disappeared into a room. “No way!” I exclaimed. We traced Cody's steps down the hall and sure enough, there he was, sitting on his dog bed grinning at us. Amazing! I was so impressed by their hard work and joyful collaboration that I welled up with tears. (It happens all the time—I'm a sucker.) By the fifth week, I had nearly run out of things to teach them!

The strength of their relationship was evident in ways other than just their obedience skills. Cody was always happy to see me and willingly worked for me, but he had a regard for Robert that was magical. If Robert lagged behind during leash walks, Cody split his time between walking next to me and stopping and waiting for Robert to catch up. If Robert walked out of the room, Cody perked up and followed him out, even if the Hot Dog Lady was sitting next to him on the floor. There was a chemistry between them that manifested itself in everything they did.

My experiences with clients like Robert and Cody and Beth and Daisy inspired me to try to dissect the specifics of the dog-human relationship, and determine just what the bond is. No small feat. We all know that a bond exists between dogs and people, but the assumption is that it just *happens*. Our dogs love us, and we love them back, right? We fill their food bowls and take them for walks, and they, in turn, worship us for it and obligingly do everything we ask of them.

Not quite.

Beth loved Daisy, and I'm certain that Daisy loved Beth back, but it was clear to all of us that love was not enough. Love was not enough to coax Daisy into *wanting* to work for Beth, despite the fact that Beth had a pocket full of hot dogs. It wasn't enough to make Daisy notice when Beth left the

room. And it certainly wasn't enough to keep Beth from getting incredibly frustrated and emotional with her dog. The more I thought about the dog-human bond, the more it became apparent that, while love is at the core, there is much more to it.

While dissecting the bond concept, I thought about my relationship with my dogs, Zeke and Sumner. Although they're far from perfect dog-trainer demo-dogs (in fact, they frequently embarrass me), we do have a pretty inspirational bond. I no longer do formal training with them, but they reliably perform stays in distraction-filled environments. I can leave my lunch on a low coffee table, tell them "Please don't," and leave the room, confident that I'll come back and find the intact sandwich next to a puddle of drool. They actually listen when I ask them to ignore the neighbor's tipped garbage can. They respect the "no dogs allowed" boundaries in our house. And if I accidentally leave the back gate open, they walk right up to the front door and wait to be let back in instead of terrorizing the neighborhood.

I discussed the bond concept with my dog-trainer friends. Why were our dogs *exceptionally* bonded to us, despite our varying commitments to training them? And why did our clients' dogs bond to us so quickly as well?

It became clear that we all unconsciously do a number of things with dogs that enhance our relationships. Some of the skills come to us naturally because we spend our days knee-deep in dogs. Some of the skills are born of necessity, in an effort to keep busy dogs and overwhelmed owners focused on the task at hand. People assume that dog trainers have a magical talent—an ability to "whisper," if you will—that allows us to communicate with dogs in a way not possible for the average dog owner. The public is led to believe that dog trainers are born, not made, and only certain people are blessed with this gift to connect with dogs. Unfortunately, that's a fallacy—one that's currently selling a lot of books full of misleading information. In my quest to define, and later teach, the easiest ways to strengthen the bond with our dogs, it became abundantly clear that *anyone* who wanted to could.

So what exactly is this mystical bond between humans and dogs? How do you know if you've *really* got it? And if you don't "got it," how do you get it?

It's time to take a step back and really look at the relationship you have—or don't have—with your dog. If you find yourself frequently frustrated with, embarrassed by, and agitated with your dog, despite all the training you've done with her, you've got a disconnect that needs to be addressed. In this book, you'll find the six building blocks for creating a positive, mutually rewarding, envy-inducing bond with your dog. My suggestions are like individual sections of a rope that braid together—they're stronger when they're intertwined. The steps are easy to incorporate into your everyday routine, and, most important, they're truly dog friendly. Some are silly, some are unorthodox, but they've all worked for me and legions of my clients—and they'll work for you, too.

Let's get started.



Though tempted, Sumner won't steal the sandwich.

Relationship Quiz: How Strong Is Your Bond?

To gauge the strength of your bond with your dog, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Does your dog check in with you during walks? Does she occasionally look up at you as you walk, or is she at the very end of her leash the entire time?** Many of my clients have what I call “sled-dog walks,” where the dog is at the end of the leash, doing everything in her power to move forward with no regard for the person at the other end.

Granted, there’s a major obedience aspect to polite leash walking, but my question dives deeper than just basic manners. Does your dog even know that you’re *there*, or are you just deadweight that keeps her from moving forward faster? A dog who keeps her pace similar to yours and *checks in* (looks up at you every so often) is acknowledging your presence and participation in the walk. You’re sharing the experience. The distance between you and your dog during a walk should not be based solely on the length of the leash—just because it extends fifteen feet doesn’t mean that your dog should be walking fourteen and a half feet away from you.

A caveat: Fearful or reactive dogs pull while leash walking for reasons unrelated to bonding. Nervous dogs are in fight-or-flight mode, and these types of pullers need behavioral modification to deal with their leash issues.



This dog is on a mission. He seems to have forgotten that his owner is with him on the walk.



This dog is in sync with her owner during their walk. She's keeping a similar pace and is checking in with her owner by looking up at her.

- **Are you afraid that if your dog slipped out the front door unleashed, she'd take off running and not come home?** During my Q&A sessions with new clients, some will laughingly tell me that when they open the front door, their dogs take off without a backward glance, not realizing that this issue paints a rather dismal picture of their relationship. I understand that certain breeds have a genetic predisposition to wander, explore, and chase rapidly retreating objects, but I don't think that those tendencies are the sole reason why some dogs make like escaped convicts every time they get a whiff of freedom. If you're going through complicated rituals to make sure that your dog can't slip past you when the door opens, it's time to revisit basic training and give some thought to just why she doesn't wait to see if you're coming out, too.
- **Do you think your dog is "too stubborn" or "too dumb" to learn basic obedience behaviors?** You probably took a training class with your dog when you brought her home. The first class was fun, the second class was tough, and then you gave up somewhere at the third or fourth week because your dog was the most excitable dog in the room, or the slowest dog in the room, or because you didn't have enough time



“Are you coming with me?”

to get to class, or you just didn’t enjoy it as much as you thought you would. And now your dog is saddled with a label that she doesn’t deserve.

I’ve worked with many people who believe that their dogs can’t figure out basic obedience training—and it brings me great joy to prove them wrong within minutes.

- **Does your dog seek you out in new environments (for example, at a crowded dog park)?** You show up at your local dog park and, of course, your dog takes off to sniff bums. That’s why she’s there! But does she circle back to check in with you at some point, or are you as good as a fence post until it’s time to go?

In the hierarchy of what’s important to dogs, other dogs are right at the top of the list, so it’s no surprise that you’re invisible when you first arrive at the park. However, you should be more than just your dog’s chauffeur and gate opener. The bonded dog wants to know where her person is no matter how intriguing the surroundings.



It can be particularly difficult to get your dog's attention at the dog park.

- **Are you frequently frustrated with your dog?** You're reading this book, so it's a safe assumption that your relationship with your dog is frustrating you. There's a degree of frustration in every dog-human relationship, but the word *frequently* in my question hints at the real problem. If frustration, which is only a few steps away from anger, forms the foundation of your relationship with your dog, how can there be any room left for joyful communication?

Answering yes to just one question wouldn't necessarily trigger a bond alarm, but the combination of several yes responses suggests that you might have a tenuous bond with your dog.

My questions were leading on purpose. You're probably more than aware that you and your dog are not in sync, but the goal of the questionnaire, though painful, is to shine a light on the heart of the bond issue between you and your dog. If you answered yes to the majority of these questions, you don't really matter to your dog when it counts.

There are a myriad reasons why that might be. It's scary to admit, but it could be due to abuse (which I dearly hope is not the case), or the temperament, age, or breed characteristics of your individual dog. Did you research your dog's breed before you got her? Are you an apartment dweller trying to figure out how to live with a high-drive German Shorthaired Pointer? Maybe

you just rescued a dog and you haven't had a chance to build a strong bond. Or maybe you're a first-time dog owner befuddled by too much conflicting advice. Maybe you're too busy working to give your dog the attention she needs. Or, on the flip side, perhaps you've given your dog *too much* freedom and she's convinced that it's *her* world and you're just livin' in it. There are endless possibilities as to why you and your dog don't have the relationship you'd like.

On the surface, it might appear that you have a sound relationship with your dog. After all, she follows you around the house, and leaps deliriously when you come home each day. But there's little competing interest in those scenarios—you're the only game in town!

Introducing the Bonded Dog

So let's take a closer look at the bonded dog. What's she like?

The bonded dog listens to basic obedience cues without thinking—it's natural for her to respond when you ask. Training is a part of her everyday routine, not something you only attempt in special circumstances, so that she'll hold a stay when you ask or come running when you call. The bonded dog wants you in her sightlines, even when she's in intriguing environments. She doesn't head out the door and take off for parts unknown, because there's no better copilot than you—you bring the fun! The bonded dog follows your house rules once you've worked through them with her. Best of all, she thinks that you're the coolest being around—as entertaining as her canine friends, almost as fun as birds and squirrels, and more scrumptious than the three-day-old bagel on the sidewalk. You've seen well-bonded dogs and their people around your neighborhood or at the dog park—they have the relationship you envy.

Now on to the big question. What is the bond? Is it love?

Not exactly. Love between you and your dog should be a given, and this isn't a book to help make your dog *love* you more. (Most people are offended when I suggest that they might have a bond issue with their dog. The first response is usually, "Oh, I know my dog loves me.") There's no question that you love dogs, since you've made the choice to introduce a dog into your home. Why else would you put up with muddy paws, saliva stalactites, fur tumbleweeds, and inquisitive noses? Dogs provide the limitless positive adoration we crave but don't always get in our human relationships.

Most people cite dogs' unconditional love as the reason *why* the love between human and dog is so deep. Dogs adore us despite our extra pounds and occasional moodiness. They forgive us when we ignore them to meet an important work deadline and when we accidentally lose our temper. A dog's love is boundless, and therein lies the reason why she has earned the title "(wo)man's best friend."



Does your dog come running when you call?

The bond is certainly rooted in love, but it's different from love. For example, my client Tina's Chinese Shar-Pei, Benson, adored her. The breed gets bad press for being independent and standoffish, but Benson was a Shar-Pei who actually *liked* to be cuddled and fussed over. I had high hopes for what Tina and Benson would be able to achieve in our sessions. Unfortunately, once we began training, things changed.

Benson simply didn't want to work for Tina. Sit? Maybe, if he felt like it. Come when called? No, thanks—there's good stuff to sniff over here on the kitchen floor. Things only got worse when we moved the training outside. Benson found every blade of grass far more intriguing—and rewarding—than his person. We could easily have written off his less-than-stellar performance on the breed standard: stubborn and aloof. But his performance for me? Awesome. It wasn't that Benson was too stubborn to train, he just wasn't interested in training with *Tina*. I had no doubt that Benson adored her, but there was something missing in their perfect-on-the-surface relationship. Unfortunately, Tina blamed Benson's responsiveness with me on my pocket full of treats. The truth was her loving relationship with Benson, combined with her pocket full of the very same treats, should have easily trumped me.

"Love is all you need." If only. I'd probably be out of a job if that were the case! Of course, you can't have a bond without love, but you certainly *can* have love without a bond. I think both Benson and Daisy loved their owners

very much, but it seems conditional: “I love you and will acknowledge you when nothing else is going on. I love you when there are no dogs, birds, squirrels, strangers, chicken bones, mulch chunks, swirling leaves, or errant molecules anywhere in sight.”

I hold the potentially unpopular view that the bond between you and your dog is actually *more important* than the love between you. While love develops naturally (one hopes), building a strong bond needs time and attention. It doesn’t happen automatically, like love—the bond develops through every interaction you have with your dog, and what you do, say, and even think all play a role in either strengthening or diminishing the bond you have with your dog. The bond forms the core of your entire relationship; if it’s lacking, it’s the source of the majority of your frustration with your dog. A strong bond is the reason your dog wants to be close to you, work for you, and listen to you.

But what is it *exactly*? Here’s how I look at the alchemy of the bond: It’s a relationship steeped in love *plus* equal parts mutual respect, trust, and regard. In short, it’s the glue of your relationship with your dog. (Sounds like a marriage.) Let’s examine the specifics of my definition.

Mutual respect

The concept of mutual respect is bound to ruffle a few feathers, as many trainers believe that respect need only be paid from the dog to the human, not vice versa. Indeed, it’s critical that your dog understands that you are keeper and controller of the fun stuff, and worthy of respect. A household lacking canine respect is a household in turmoil.

Take Katie, a college student and owner of Tucker, a *massive* Golden Retriever. Katie adored Tucker, but she never instilled rules or boundaries in her household, so she ended up with a pushy, obnoxious, almost unbearable dog who ran the show. If Tucker saw something on the counter that interested him, he leapt up and helped himself. When he wasn’t getting enough attention, he jumped on the closest human and nipped to try to get a reaction. Respect? Tucker gleefully did what he wanted when he wanted, and no one was stopping him. Katie was merely a speed bump on the road to getting his way.

I don’t believe that respect should be a one-way street in the canine-human relationship. Showing your dog respect will not upset the natural order of the animal world, nor will it leave you with a dog who is plotting a coup to overthrow the household. Historically, gaining respect from your dog required a heavy hand and a hard heart—you could swap the word *respect* with *fear* and probably end up with the same dog-training to-do list. Looking at respect as a mutual effort, though, softens the hard edges of the concept. Respecting your dog means:

- Treating him as a sentient, feeling being, given to moods and, yes, bad days. (We’re quick to forget that dogs aren’t little computers to be programmed.)

- Accepting your dog's limitations—maybe your dog doesn't *like* to play fetch, despite what the breed description says.
- Using kindness and patience to train.
- Refraining from physical means to “correct” bad behavior or enforce household rules.

Respecting your dog is almost as important as your dog respecting you.



The love between dog and guardian should happen naturally. Developing a strong bond takes time and attention.

Trust

The second part of my definition, trust, is the unspoken commodity of the canine-human relationship. In order to allow your dog to live in your home, you must be able to trust him not to eliminate inside, destroy your couch, or bite Aunt Sally. You trust that your dog's base animal instincts are quelled enough so that he seamlessly adapts to your world—life on the leash is a worthy trade-off for the comforts of home.

Of course, there's a flip side to my definition. Can your dog trust *you*?

Years ago I worked with a client, Bruce, who insisted that his Rhodesian Ridgeback, Sasha, jog with him every day, despite the fact that the dog was terrified of the cars passing by. Each time Sasha spotted a car on the horizon, she cowered and trembled and, as it came closer, the poor dog raced back and forth at the end of the leash, inconsolable. After cars passed, Sasha shook, panted, and refused to walk any farther, all the while scanning the horizon for more "monsters."

After seeing Sasha's dramatic fearfulness (it was the most extreme case I'd witnessed), I knew that I needed to have an uncomfortable conversation with Bruce. I couldn't understand why he continued running with Sasha when it was so clearly traumatizing her. Why would anyone voluntarily put a dog through that kind of stress on a daily basis? At first, I danced around my prognosis: "I understand how important your workouts are to you, but Sasha is really, really afraid out here. It's impossible to train her while she's so nervous, because her fear will prevent her from processing anything that we're trying to teach her. You just can't get through to a dog in this type of distress. In order to help Sasha get past this, we need to create a systematic training program. I'll map it all out for you, and we'll chip away at her fear together."

The look of concern on Bruce's face was not for the reason I expected. "How long is it going to take to fix this?"

"Well," I replied, "*fix* is a tricky word. These kinds of behavioral issues are like diabetes; you can treat them but you can't necessarily cure them. It's likely that she can overcome some of her fears, but I can't guarantee that it'll happen at the pace you're hoping for. Dealing with this level of fearfulness takes time, especially with such a pronounced reaction. Sasha has to set the pace, not you. That means that you'll have to hang up her running shoes for a while."

"Well, my wife and I do a five-mile run with her every weekend and we're not going to give that up. Sasha needs her exercise."

I was stunned. Was he not hearing me? Could he not see how stressed out his dog was? I decided to end the pleasantries and make my perspective perfectly clear.

"Sasha should not run though the neighborhood with you until there's a marked improvement in her reaction to cars. It's just not fair to her. If you

can find a quiet park where you can run with her, do that instead. *I'll* help you understand when she's okay running on the street with you. Based on what I saw today, it won't be soon, and it definitely won't be by this Saturday."

I could tell by Bruce's demeanor that he wasn't buying my approach, and I prepared myself for the "thanks but no thanks" phone call that was to come after our lesson. I didn't have to wait long. Bruce told me that he was concerned that my slow and steady approach would be too drawn out, and that he really didn't want to stop running with his dog. He offered that if I could teach a technique that allowed him to continue running through his neighborhood with Sasha, then he'd be happy to work with me.

I couldn't do that.

Sasha required a methodical, dog-safe approach for dealing with her fear issues, but Bruce didn't have the patience to see it through. Granted, I've found that many people find it difficult to work through behavioral-modification programs, but what bothered me most was Bruce's lack of concern for Sasha's welfare. He knew that she was petrified during the daily runs, yet he didn't care. Could Sasha trust her owner to keep her out of harm's way? Absolutely not. Sadly, he put her there every day.

Regard

The final part of my definition of the bond, regard, is the most public face of the relationship between you and your dog. While the mutual respect and trust between you and your dog probably aren't on display at the dog park or during a leash walk, your dog's level of attentiveness toward you certainly is, and attentiveness is a sign of how your dog regards you. Are you all but invisible to your dog (like Daisy was with Beth), or are you the center of her universe (as Robert was to Cody)?

I'm not suggesting that you need that slavish sort of attention that you see at dog shows where the dog rarely looks away from the handler's face—it's unrealistic (and silly) to expect that laser focus in the everyday world. But it's critically important that your dog wants to check in with you and cares about your proximity to her no matter where you take her. Attentiveness is your dog's way of saying, "We're in this together, right?"

It's easy to train a dog to watch or look when you ask her to, but those learned behaviors aren't the same thing as straight-from-the-heart regard for you. A bonded dog looks to you because she *wants* to connect with you, not because you've asked her to. I once worked with a client who taught her young mixed-breed pup to glance up at her face when she said, "Watch." I was impressed the first time I saw it, but I soon realized that the word was a crutch for her. During walks, the pup was far more interested in the passersby on the sidewalk than he was in his person, so the woman compensated by saying, "Watch! Duke! Duke! Watch!" every four steps. Duke dutifully

swung his eyes to meet hers each time she asked, collected his treat, then went right back to ignoring her. The cycle continued for the entire walk, until Duke tired of treats and decided to ignore his person's never-ending requests for attention. In this case, Duke had been taught to check in with his person, but he only did so begrudgingly, when she asked. I never saw Duke look up at his person to check in on his own. Unfortunately, he only did it when he was getting "paid," not because he wanted to.

I like the word *regard* because it encompasses a few elements of the bond: attentiveness, concern, and esteem. The word *regard* suggests a relationship based on mutual well-being, and an investment in one another. That is, in a nutshell, the very core of the bond.

What a Strong Bond Can Do

With my attempted deconstruction of the bond complete, let's dive into the fun stuff. Once you've grown a titanium bond with your dog, what's next? What does a strong bond do for you and your dog?

No bad dogs

When I go to social events and people find out that I'm a dog trainer, someone inevitably says, "Oh, I tried training my dog, but she's just so naughty! I swear, she knows how to do sit and down, but she only does them when *she* wants to!" Sounds like someone needs a bond intervention!

Once you've assessed your relationship and worked on your bond, you won't have to use the excuse, "She knows how to do it—she's just stubborn," to explain away your dog's misbehavior. I've heard some of my former clients use that line, and it chafes me because the seeming insubordination usually isn't just the dog's fault. For some reason, obedience training is often viewed purely as "tricks," or cute little behaviors that a dog will do in order to obtain a promised treat in a very controlled scenario (for example, doing a sit in the kitchen in order to get a cookie before bed every night). Your dog may seem to become "stubborn" when you ask to her to sit when her favorite neighbors want to greet her; instead, she responds by jumping.

But think about it: Have you ever practiced sit in that type of distracting environment? Has your dog even attempted a sit outside the four walls of your house? Does she know how to sit when faced with people who are excited to see her and eager to pet her? The bonded dog has a sit vocabulary that works at your friendly neighbor's house and beyond.

Sweet freedom

A strong bond is your dog's passport to the world. The “bad dog” has to stay home because she can't contain herself in the car, or she makes a spectacle of herself at the pet store; the bonded dog gets to accompany you anywhere you'd like to take her. While the bonded dog is out and about, she's attentive to you and well-mannered. She's a welcoming host to your guests. Instead of jumping up on them at the front door and harassing them as they sit on the couch, she greets them with good cheer and gentle affection, and then goes about her business. The bonded dog is the ultimate canine ambassador.

How touching

“Oh, I can't trim my dog's nails. She hates it when I touch her feet. And brushing her? Are you kidding?!”

Sound familiar? I get nervous when I hear about dogs who won't let their owners handle them. *Touch intolerance* (which is something entirely different from *touch avoidance*, due to undiagnosed pain) suggests a lack of trust. Physically connecting with your dog, whether for affection or basic care like nail clipping and tooth brushing, is a critical part of your relationship. After all, if you can't touch your own dog, how do you expect your vet or groomer to do it?

Touch for a treat

Is your dog funny about having certain parts of her body (like her feet or neck) handled? This strategy can help her get over some of her handling sensitivity by teaching her that she can earn treats for allowing you to gently touch her.

Start working on a neutral area on your dog's body that's far away from the “hot zone.” If she's sensitive about her feet, start with her shoulders. Gently touch your dog's shoulder for a second, and then deliver a meaty treat with the opposite hand. Repeat the process several times, changing the duration of the touch and adding unpredictable pauses so that your dog doesn't pick up on a rhythm. Gradually work your way down your dog's leg, touching and then treating, until you can quickly touch her foot without provoking a reaction.

For a more detailed look at this body-handling process, check out *Mine!: A Practical Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs*, by Jean Donaldson (Kinship Communications).

Note: Some handling issues have nothing to do with the strength of the bond with your dog. A rescued dog with a history of painful nail trims, or a dog who has undiagnosed back issues, will likely react poorly to handling.

My Sumner detests having his nails clipped (he howls like a baby before the clipper even touches a nail), but he begrudgingly allows me to do it without a fight. (His dramatic editorial comments as I clip make me giggle, and he seems to know that. He's a ham.) Sumner was recently bleeding from the mouth, and it was clear that he wasn't feeling well, but I was able to inspect the inside of his mouth thoroughly until I discovered the source of the injury.

Zeke's dysplastic back hips pain him when he runs too much, but I can relieve some of his pain with gentle massage, right near his most tender areas. I can tell my touch is uncomfortable for him at first by the way his eyes move and by his breathing patterns (more on reading your dog's body language in chapter 3), but he works through the pain, as if he knows the unpleasantness will decrease as his muscles relax.

My dogs allow me full body access because we have a strong bond based on trust, and they know that my touch brings good things.

You drive me crazy

You didn't bring a dog into your home thinking that your relationship would be a source of conflict and frustration, but somehow, here you are. You enrolled in a six-week training course back when your dog was a pup, you take her on a fifteen-minute walk twice a day, and you just can't understand why things aren't turning out as you'd planned. You're embarrassed by your dog's behavior. You're at the end of your rope. "I wanted Lassie," you think. "How did I end up with *this* dog?" Enter, the bond. It's time to turn your confrontational relationship into a symbiotic one.

I'm not saying that strengthening the bond with your dog will release you from any and all frustration you might feel when it comes to your canine best friend. I think that my dogs are pretty amazing, but they still do things that make me simmer. For example, they love to fence-fight with the dog who lives behind us. There's nothing I can do to override their drive to make the neighbor dog's life unpleasant when she's in her backyard. Though I can't stop the unmannerly behavior from kicking in, I can short-circuit it as soon as it begins. I've trained them to respond to a whistle, so as soon as I hear a hint that a backyard rumble is afoot, I give it a toot and watch them sail back to me. They've gotten better and better at returning to me when I whistle, so a once annoying behavior has become an exercise in advanced training. It's actually an impressive recall now! My minor frustrations with my dogs exist, but our strong bond makes them manageable.



Sumner doesn't enjoy having his nails clipped, but he tolerates it without a struggle.

Is It Ever Too Late to Build a Bond?

Want the short answer?

No.

Of course, many factors can impact the speed of the bonding process, and the ultimate strength of your new bond. Your history with your dog will play a major part. If you've had an ongoing human-versus-dog attitude that led you to physically discipline your dog using intimidation and pain-based techniques (like spanking, alpha rolls, scruff shakes, choke chains, or electronic collars), I can guarantee that it'll take time to heal the damage done.

In a formerly punitive household, the dog needs to learn to trust her owner again. The beauty of making the switch from traditional training to a more positive approach is that, once you begin, everything snowballs in the best possible way. It's as if you've flipped a switch in your dog that suddenly enables her to act like a dog, not a robot. Your dog will have a new spring in her step and, once she's learned to trust again, a new regard for you. I've seen it happen with my own eyes, and it's a beautiful thing.

Your dog's age will impact the process as well. Nine years of ignoring you at the dog park when it's time to leave won't turn around magically overnight—that's a lot of history to undo! Now, I am in no way suggesting that older dogs are incapable of changing—you *can* teach an old dog new tricks. I am saying, though, that an older dog might be more set in her ways and used to life as she knows it. Growing the bond with an older dog takes patience.

Although it's difficult for me to admit it, your dog's breed will also play a part in the process. Why is it difficult to admit? Because I'm not "breedist." When I train, I always try to see the individual dog before me rather than a set of breed characteristics on four legs. I believe that too much canine misbehavior is written off due to breed types. When I hear,

Old-school training: Don't try this at home

An *alpha roll* is an outdated training technique used to discipline a dog that is perceived to be misbehaving. The dog is flipped onto her back and held there by her chest or neck until she calms down and "submits" to the owner.

A *scruff shake* is a behavioral correction that requires the owner to grab the sides of the dog's neck, glare into the dog's eyes, and shout "No!"

An *electronic collar*, also known as an *e-collar* or *tap collar*, is a training tool that delivers a painful shock through two contact points at the dog's throat when the owner perceives that the dog is acting inappropriately.

“My dog will never be able to walk politely on a leash—she’s a Husky,” I don’t buy it. Sure, it might be more challenging to teach a Husky to walk close to you due to her genetic predisposition to pull, and you’ll need to be more committed to the process, but it’s certainly not *impossible* to teach a northern breed to walk with poise. (Give your dog some credit!) That said, I can’t be blind to the fact that breed characteristics *do* play a part in the strength of the bond. Some breeds don’t crave physical affection and closeness. Some are loners. Some are standoffish. Some are “programmed” to perform a job. Some might prefer to bond to just one person in the household, and maybe for now it’s not you.

Not every dog breed falls under the goofy, let-me-smother-you-with-kisses umbrella of canine behavior. My bonding suggestions won’t necessarily turn an aloof dog into a cuddler—you can’t change your dog’s temperament. In keeping with my “I’m not a breeder” stance, I still believe that even the less demonstrative breeds or the born-to-work breeds can grow an enviable bond with their person. It just might take longer, and it might not be as flashy.

Some dog-human matches never should have happened, and those odd couples might also find the bonding process more challenging. Years ago, I worked with a young woman who lived in a studio apartment in the city and who had a thriving social calendar that involved happy hours and late nights, and a—wait for it—six-month-old Border Collie. A don’t-fence-me-in, on-the-job, born-to-problem-solve Border Collie. When I asked her why she opted to bring home a high-drive breed given her busy lifestyle and tiny apartment, she told me that she “liked how they look.”

Reassessing the relationship

It’s not easy to admit that you might have made a mistake when you selected your dog. If you’ve determined that your match isn’t a healthy one—for you or your dog—there’s no shame in considering rehoming her. If you can’t give a dog the time or attention she deserves, rehoming is the most humane solution.

Be honest about the reasons why you’re relinquishing your dog as you complete the paperwork so that the adoption coordinators can find an appropriate new home. Fibbing about your dog’s behavioral traits (like covering up if she’s not good with other dogs, or if she’s not potty trained) is unfair to both the dog and future adopters. Consider breed-specific rescue if you have a purebred dog, or a nationwide organization like Petfinder (www.petfinder.com).

If you made an uninformed breed choice but you're 100 percent committed to keeping your dog no matter the circumstances (a potentially unwise decision in some scenarios), recognize that you're going to have to work harder and longer at growing your bond. It's difficult enough to do the right thing for your dog in the best circumstances (when you have ample free time, plenty of yard space, and robust health), but when you're saddled with a long workday that doesn't leave time for your dog, or you live in a dog-unfriendly environment, or you're not physically able to give your dog enough exercise, you have to put in extra effort to see that your dog somehow gets what she needs and then some.

Newer rescue dogs with baggage might seem bond-resistant at first. The shy dog, the skittish dog, and the dog with too many issues to name will be suspicious and untrusting for reasons that probably have nothing to do with you. Your bonding process will require a great deal of patience. I liken it to a dance, with your dog acting as Fred Astaire to your Ginger Rogers. Fred led the dance, Ginger followed, and the same goes for you and your dog. It's important that shy dogs be allowed to set the pace for training and behavioral-modification programs. Pushing shy dogs out of their comfort zone, or asking too much of them, can halt the process.

I once worked with a couple who had just adopted an extremely shy 4-year-old Dachshund, Millie. The husband respected the dog's timidity and let her approach life at her own pace, but the wife was eager to cement the relationship with her new best friend. She pushed poor Millie with a good-natured relentlessness. The wife reached for Millie when the dog retreated under the ottoman, and pulled the now stiff-as-a-board dog onto her lap for cuddle time. As the weeks passed, the wife couldn't understand why Millie sought out her husband over her. His trust-building patience was just what Millie needed.

All of the previous gloom and doom doesn't change the fact that if you want to strengthen your relationship with your dog, you can. It's never too late, your dog is never too old, and your scenario is never too screwed up to commit to nurturing a stronger relationship. The process will be subtle. You might experience gains that are two steps forward, one step back—which can be frustrating—but have confidence in the fact that you're making progress and your relationship is changing for the better.

Both you and your dog will feel the change, and be happier for it.



A strong bond is a good thing for you and your dog!

