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Exploring the Canine language.



Dogs are Dogs Wherever You Go

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Being a recent transplant to the island and being a dog trainer as well, I wondered if perhaps I would find the dogs out here to be in a calmer state of mind. Los Angeles operates at a break-neck speed in general, and there is no doubt that stress and aggression can be transferred, but it turns out that dogs are dogs wherever you go, and Hawaii is no exception.

The biggest problem with misbehaving dogs is usually attached to the person who belongs to them. This is generally because the person hasn't learned how to communicate with his dog, or because there is no time or effort put into shaping behavior. The people who cry the loudest about how horrid their dog is are usually the ones that lead the most hectic lives themselves.

I have seen countless examples of chaotic homes with all the blame going to the dog. Many a time I have walked through a door to see children screaming and yelling at the dog and pulling its tail, and Mom wonders why Fido pees on the floor and hides all the time.

I have also arrived at someone's house to see the harried help frantically running to and fro with a woman telling me indignantly that her nanny is stuck in traffic. Said person will then proceed to tell me that the puppy that looked so cute in the pet store has turned into a Cujo overnight. Should she trade it in for a better model? In reality overnight has been three months, the dog has had no training or direction, and through osmosis is radiating the same sort of chaotic energy. You couldn't ask for a better recipe of frustration and bad manners, and I'm talking about what has been transmitted to the poor dog.

To be fair though, everyone has some sort of chaos in his or her life, and that's not really the problem. The problems start when people blame their dogs for things going wrong and don't take the time and energy to work on the problems.

And I'm not talking about shouting at your dog; especially when he's not even listening.

Watching people shout at their dogs and expecting them to listen has always baffled me. Take the off-leash dog I saw happily sniffing along a walk with his human dad. Fido gets caught up in a scent and stops. Dad then starts screaming to Fido, "Fido come here now!" Fido finds the scent far more interesting than a troublesome screeching voice, so Fido simply ignores him. Dad gets angrier and screams louder. Fido finally gets bored with the scent and trots over to Dad, but what awaits him? "Bad dog! I told you to come!" Now I don't know about you, but I would have no desire to go to someone who is going to yell at me for coming when called.

Another interesting example of miscommunication happened recently while I was walking my ferocious five-pound Chihuahua, Boris. A man was walking his Fox Terrier mix towards mine (actually the dog was pulling him towards us) when little alarm bells went off in my head. He had the dog on a harness for starters, and while I understand some breeds need these for breathing issues, they are completely useless for any kind of control with your dog. He also had him on a free-range flexi leash (the worst leash for walking), further empowering the dog to be totally in control of the walk. I let my little guy meet all dogs unless I think there is a chance that he might be swallowed whole, and the result is I have a nicely socialized little dog. The other dog after one brief sniff however, decided my guy Boris might be something fun to torment. The dad tried desperately to control his dog but with lousy results. The emerging devil dog was snorting, pulling and trying to nip at Boris; this was not a play date in the making. Dad then leaned over and in his best stern voice threatened him that he'd better behave "or else." He tried unsuccessfully to reel him in with his useless leash, and no surprise here, devil dog completely ignored Dad and focused on how he could get a good shot at Boris. As Dad walked away yelling at his dog to knock it off, the devil dog switched focus and decided it would be more fun to nip at Dad's pants. As I watched the out of sync couple push and pull down the sidewalk, I couldn't help but feel bad for the dog because it really

wasn't his fault. This dog simply needed the proper walking tools, correction, praise and motivation. It is amazing what you can accomplish when you are in charge and you know how to communicate with your dog. I love teaching how to talk to your dog so that they understand what you are asking of them, and rewarding them when they get it right. It's a great feeling to see the light bulb moments go off in dogs' heads; you can almost hear them say "Ta da!"

Now obviously no one does everything right all the time, but there are so many instances where just a little training and leadership would go such a long way. Remember you have to have your dog's attention before asking them to do something. Once you have their attention, don't blow it by telling them to sit fifty times in a row. Dogs are neither stupid nor deaf. You also want to reward their good behavior; everybody likes a pat on the back, or in this case, on the head.

So I imagine I will basically see the same sort of problems and solutions that I saw in Los Angeles with a few basic differences. The climate, scenery, and the ocean are far superior here, only the dogs remain the same.

Dog trainer and former dog nanny for Ozzie Osbourne, Abby Elliott is offering her canine expertise in Honolulu. For more information, contact Abby at the Animal CARE Foundation, East Honolulu Intervention Center, (808) 396-3333.