

SCARED SITLESS

By Maureen Ross, MA, NCC, CPDT, RYT

I have seen a lot of adopted dogs and puppies! I'm always learning from them. I have had no less than 1,000 epiphanies over the years some epic, some glimpses into my past and how I could have done things differently. That's learning. I have concluded that people who do not challenge themselves (me included) and don't risk making mistakes, don't learn much. It is okay to play it safe but when it comes to another species as special as a dog, I think it's important to take a chance and try something new.

We have all heard of light bulb moments; those delightful konk me on the head, slap me awake moments where we are totally engaged in the here and now. I get them observing dogs. Through observation and listening, I am able to connect to something beyond myself and what I think I know. I notice too often that many dog parents focus so much on getting the dog to sit, that the dog becomes "scared sitless". I can tell because they dog is looking around, sniffing, zoning out, or worse, pretending to be invisible. It isn't because the dog can't learn to sit. All puppies sit, roll over and lie down at two weeks. They don't get what they are doing. They just know that Mom is sitting, and it's easier to put their body weight on their rear end – seems natural!

When teaching our dogs to do anything, their needs to be meaning in it. Asking our dogs or a puppy to sit 14 times is pretty much a mute moot point. What for? That's why we make training fun and meaningful using life rewards.

In today's eager, result-oriented must do, must have, must try world, this tends to be a common dog parent to dog thing in training (the dog simply won't lie down). Yes, they do, we simply have to motivate them to do it and/or catch them doing it (backward shaping of a behavior) and spontaneously say, "GOOD DOWN."

When training becomes training and not about developing a relationship, the focus from the handler's perspective can be so intense that the dogs become scared sit-less, down-less and come-less. Sure, there are several other reasons that can apply too. Regardless, the outcome is frustrating for owner and confusing for the dog.

GET OVER OURSELVES AND INTO THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Getting beyond our egos (self centeredness) is one way connect or re-connect to our dogs, self and others. Knowing that puppies come with a clean canvas, we can get lost in the mechanical skill of training and our goals. Knowing that adopted dogs are already confused, we have to begin with the transition of untangling that confusion, piece by piece, taking as much time as it needs to do it safely, genuinely and compassionately. What's the hurry if there is a lifelong commitment? Most of the time, it is hurry-up training that gets the dog parent / dog relationship into trouble in the first place.

Often, I hear, “My puppy does not do this or that or I think the dog was abused.” Perhaps! Now, let it go and begin from here. Puppies pee on floors, chew children’s toys and jump on people *because they can and enjoy it*. Dog generalize, so don’t know what is Mine, Yours, or Ours until we teach them. If you had 6 children, each would learn differently and at various paces. Learning styles vary today, thank goodness, so that children can learn in an understandable way. Toss in a different species, like our dogs, and we need to breathe deeply, nose-to-navel, and ask ourselves if “how” we teaching makes sense to the dog.

Daily living and learning with dogs, as I share in [Awareness Centered Training – ACT](#), is an ongoing process that does not start and stop with training in a classroom, private coaching or wif. After several months of living with a new puppy or dog, it is WSYWYT (what you see is what you teach).

ACT is joyful, easy training that can be integrated into daily living and learning, using what comes natural, life rewards. We have many options and choices today, and sometimes, that’s what makes training our dogs so complex. It doesn’t have to be.

We need to consider getting over ourselves in the process of teaching our dogs how we want them to live in our human families and lifestyles. This requires an “ego-ectomy”. Dogs, and especially puppies, do not learn from ego, book, or Internet. Our most “enlightened moments” come from silence and praising the dog when they voluntarily offer a behavior we want like, “Sit, wait, gently - Okay, here is your dinner.”

Pups / dogs learn from experience, repetition, practice, guessing and past coping and survival skills. These skills may be outdated once living with a new family, just like our skills may need fine tuning when we change jobs.

Be mindful, attention is attention, regardless of the context, and especially if puppy’s and dogs are under-stimulated (guided, safe exercise, games and energy balancing). Conversely, dogs who are new to a family (adopted) or highly energetic pups, need to learn some self control. Keeping stimulation in balance bodes well for creating a happy, healthy confident dog that knows how to watch you before pouncing.

The exception is the powerful environment. Dogs purely enjoy being entertained when out of walks. The smells, activities and interactions turn them on, especially if they don’t get out much (socialization, manners and desensitization). And, indulge when I share that not all dogs enjoy dog parks or interaction with other dogs anymore than I enjoyed ballet classes as a child (yuck).

Many Internet sites and books offer guidance to raise awareness, education and relationship with your dog. One of the most regarded and now being recommended for Pet Therapy Team Training is my new book, [Awareness Centered Training – ACT](#). I have come a long way since training my first Chihuahua. What is special about ACT is it is all inclusive with a thorough index whether you have a new puppy, adopted dog or have a goal of becoming a registered therapy teams or dog trainer even.

OUR RELATIONSHIP **IS** THE TRAINING PART

ACT is about balance, relationship, education and well-being of both dog and dog parent. It includes learning theory but not in a tedious way (check out the dictionary at the back of the book). The focus is simply and amazingly on choice and being able to conveniently and effectively teach your puppy or dog.

Training our dogs can easily be integrated into daily living and learning with life rewards (eating, playing, toys, touch, and well-being). For example: Dogs are contextual - living in the moment, so training our dog in the kitchen by throwing their food bowl down is a complete waste of energy.

Instead, read [Doggy Diner](#) | www.dogtalk.com and included in ACT. Dogs eat in a few seconds. Make good use of this time. If you feed your dog 2X a day, you have 14 training opportunities a week, EVEN if you are busy and have to run off to daycare or work.

Most of us want our dogs to respond to us with respect and this can happen with Awareness Centered Training indoors, outdoors and in training school.

Change comes not in what your puppy or dog is doing. Change and learning happens with teaching moments.

Be well ... and consider [Awareness Centered Training - ACT](#), available at all major booksellers in e-book and soft cover.