

Dog training and management - are we maximising our opportunities?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the relationship between obedience training and responsible dog ownership is examined. The training available to owners at obedience classes in South-east Queensland is also reviewed. A profile is obtained of the dogs which begin training, and the reasons for enrolling in classes is examined. Based on this information, some suggestions are made to improve the outcomes of training. The behaviour (of dog and owner) required by councils in an attempt to reduce dog complaints and promote responsible dog ownership are also examined. A responsible dog ownership education package, which addresses both of the issues, is described.

INTRODUCTION

Three questions of interest to local government and the community include:

- what training is now available at obedience classes?
- what do dog owners require from obedience classes?
- do either of these fulfil the requirements local authorities have of dog owners?

It is a common opinion in local government that obedience training classes for dogs and their owners will assist in reducing dog problems - some local authorities even give a registration discount to owners who have participated in obedience training.

While training is (or should be) a fun activity for dog and owner, and can lead to the *SPORT* of Obedience Trialing, there is little evidence to validate the theory that *owner + dog + obedience training = NO PROBLEM to council*.

TRAINING CLASSES

Brisbane, like other larger Australian cities and towns, is served by a number of All Breeds Obedience Clubs, which offer weekly training classes to dog owners. The fee for each class attended is usually paid prior to the commencement of the class. Thus there is no monetary incentive for absence-free attendance.

Classes are conducted by volunteer instructors, who have variable knowledge of the principles of instruction, and whose dog training experience varies from the training of one dog to many years experience encompassing several breeds.

Clubs are required by Canine Control Council regulations to restrict enrolment in classes to dogs over the age of 4 months. This is the only restriction. Classes often contain both entire and desexed males and females of all ages. Some clubs restrict enrolment to monthly intakes, and encourage new members to attend an orientation session, which is not compulsory. At most clubs people can enter the Beginners Class at any session. They then move on to the first class. From this point onwards, advancement is by merit, the owner and dog having to complete the required exercises at an acceptable standard to enter the next class.

Classes usually are conducted over a one and a half hour period, with a break midway through the training. Some clubs have a shorter (one hour) class, with no break.

Some training classes are conducted by private instructors. As for club training, knowledge and experience vary. Owners usually pay for a course of lessons prior to the commencement of the first class. Numbers are usually limited and the entire class progresses as one group. The curriculum is often similar to that of the training clubs.

CURRICULUM OF TRAINING CLASSES

The first commands taught in the Beginners Class are *heel* and *sit*. Numbers of students are often very large in the early classes and training is usually done in a circle with the instructor in the centre, shouting the commands. Advancement to more advanced classes enables the owner and dog to learn to execute the commands *down*, *stand*, *stay* and *come*. They also perform heeling at fast and slow paces. When all of these exercises can be performed on-lead at training class, off-lead work is begun. If the owner and dog demonstrate proficiency at all exercises, and the dog is pedigreed and registered with the Canine Control Council, the owner is encouraged to prepare for and enter a Novice Obedience Trial (see Appendix I for format).

Very few owners reach the trial ring, however. Burch and Pickel (1991) estimated that, in the USA, less than 0.25 percent of American Kennel Club registered pedigreed dogs compete in obedience trials.

DROPOUTS

Burch and Pickel (1991) interviewed people who had begun attending obedience classes with their dogs but failed to complete the course. They determined that the most common reasons for failing to complete the course of instruction were unhappiness with the quality of instruction or no change in the dog's behaviour. Intervention was implemented in response to comments and consisted of individual attention to students, reinforcement and feedback. This resulted in a reduction of the dropout rate from 85 percent to 56 percent.

Burch and Pickel (1991) developed an evaluation program, *Canine Good Citizen*, to determine a dog's ability to cope with everyday situations. The philosophy of the Canine Good Citizen program also stresses the importance of properly confining and controlling pets. The test contains a number of sub-tests presenting everyday situations owners might meet with their dog. These are graded pass or fail and the dog and its owner have to pass all sections to receive the award (Appendix II).

Dunbar (pers. comm. 1993) surveyed 62 trainers who conducted classes for pet dogs (those whose owners wished to learn general management). The most important areas defined by the trainers were bite inhibition, socialisation with people, house training and how to praise. *Sit* and *down* and *walking on the lead without pulling* (not necessarily heeling) were also included, but were considered to be of lesser importance. A similar survey conducted in 1992 had resulted in the same areas being identified as important. Trainers perceived that the needs of the average dog owner were for general training in real situations, rather than in the artificial conditions tested in the obedience competition ring.

This view was not shared by instructors from obedience clubs surveyed by Burch and Healy (1991). Only 12 percent of instructors who participated in the survey felt that current trial orientated training classes should be modified to incorporate obedience in real-life situations. They believed that formal training should *generalise* to functional settings. These researchers also surveyed beginning students and found that 73 percent of them favoured replacing the existing training curriculum with the Canine Good Citizen program. They suggested that this difference in perception was a contributing factor to the attrition rate of obedience club training, which they estimated to be 55 percent nationally.

THE NEEDS OF DOG OWNERS

Myles (1991:245) list the characteristics of a good training class:

- methods which are easy for most people to master quickly;
- most dogs show marked improvement within one session;
- dogs enjoy the training and are not forced or threatened;
- practical exercises suitable for household pets are taught;
- rubber hoses, sticks, leashes and hands are not used to hit the dog;
- choke chains and pinch collars are not used exclusively (the use of a choke chain does not necessarily indicate that the trainer is abusive or incompetent, but it may indicate a resistance to adopt easier and less harsh methods);

- dogs keep all four feet on the ground - they are not hung in the air by their collars, jerked off their feet, or swung from side to side;
- easy communication between the trainer and class includes repeating instructions in different ways so that all clients understand;
- the trainer is gentle with dogs and is a consistent model for the principle that the brains are more effective than brawn when it comes to training animals;
- the clients are relaxed, at ease, and enjoying themselves. They talk among themselves at appropriate times, and feel at home in the class.

To assess the perceived needs of owners, and whether this perception changes during participation in classes, the author has designed a series of four surveys. All surveys have a common group of questions which gathers such information as the age, sex and breed of the dog, the age at which the dog was acquired, its origin, and the reasons for getting the dog and for attending obedience classes. The first survey was completed by new attendees at obedience classes. It was administered by trainers at South-east Queensland Canine Control Council affiliated obedience clubs.

Follow up work will review the composition of classes as attendees progress through training, and a separate survey will collect information from people who have dropped out of classes.

RESULTS OF FIRST SURVEY

Contrary to the commonly held belief that attendance at obedience classes mirrors dog ownership in the community, the composition of classes showed several major differences to general dog ownership.

Breed

Almost half of the dogs were pedigreed and registered, while another quarter were identified by their owners as being purebred. Less than a quarter were identified as crossbreds. Almost 90 percent were medium to large dogs.

Age

Sixty-five percent of dogs in the sample were acquired as puppies under 12 months of age. Surprisingly a high percentage were acquired as young pups aged 3-6 months, comprising 25 percent of the total. The older dogs in the survey tended to have been acquired as adults.

Reason for acquiring a dog

Almost 80 percent of owners gave companionship as a major reason for acquiring the dog. A lesser number, 53 percent, identified protection as a factor. Twenty-six percent had considered obedience trialing when they acquired their dog.

Where the dog was acquired

More than half of the animals in the survey were purchased from the dog breeders, or had been bred by their owners. Eleven percent were acquired from pet shops. Seven percent were purchased from refuges or shelters. This figure is probably low as the RSPCA, the main source of such acquisitions in Brisbane, conducts its own successful training classes and was not included in the survey. Only two animals were identified as strays.

Reason for attending training class

Almost without exception, owners nominated their reasons for attending training classes as being to obtain a better relationship with the dog or to achieve a general behavioural improvement, and often both.

The information from this initial survey provides food for thought for both obedience clubs and local government.

The high percentage of owners who had set their sights on trialing at the time they purchased their dog, compared with the participation rate of overall dog population in trialing, suggests that, to some degree, clubs are preaching to the converted. This suggestion is supported by the finding of high numbers of young purebred dogs in the sample.

From both the views of clubs and councils, training of young pups is great - dogs are socialised, and their handlers are helped take control of the relationship. However, given that the attention span of young pups is short, classes do not accommodate their optimum learning patterns.

As companionship was found to be an obviously very important factor in the acquisition of a dog, the primary function of training classes should be to make the dog more companionable - formal training and trialing can be introduced later, and will be undertaken by more people if their primary needs are met first.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REQUIREMENTS OF DOG OWNERS

In June 1991, the Brisbane City Council established a Companion Animal Task Force to examine dog and cat management in Brisbane. It was determined that the criteria for responsible companion animal ownership were:

- to protect the peace of their locality and the welfare of their animal;
- to control and supervise their animals at all times to prevent roaming outside their property and trespassing on lands in other occupation;
- to ensure that their animal does not cause nuisance to other domestic animals, wildlife or people particularly in relation to noise, physical threat or attack;
- to keep under effective control by confining to owners property to assist in controlling unwanted populations of straying animals;
- to ensure that their animal is identified at all times by either wearing a collar and tag or microchip identification;
- to ensure that their animal is constantly registered with the Council so as to ensure that, if it strays, it can be returned to the owner;
- to keep their animal under effective control and limit casual breeding and resultant unwanted litters.

Senior animal management staff from Brisbane and surrounding local authorities, and students in Ithaca TAFE College's Animal Control Officers training program reported that the two major areas of concern for councils are dogs wandering at large and creating noise.

Dusha (1991) estimated that there were approximately 75,000 dogs in Brisbane in 1991. In the previous year, 4,381 dogs had been impounded, of which 2,118 were unclaimed. Also in 1990, 267 dog attacks were reported in Brisbane. This probably represented 60 percent of actual attacks (Dusha 1991). Dusha also refers to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report published in 1987 which stated that 24 percent of complaints about noise referred to barking dogs. Dusha (1991) reported that the Brisbane City Council investigated approximately 400 complaints about barking dogs per annum.

Burch and Pickel (1993) found a similar problem in Florida, where many dogs were allowed to run free, became nuisances and bit people. They found that only a small percentage of people followed their local animal control by laws because it was the right thing to do. A program of public education, developing and distributing information packages for owners, was trialed and it was found that it was of value only if the owner was actively seeking information or was in a receptive mood. It was also found that people would suffer annoyance from neighbourhood dogs, rather than complain.

Burch and Pickel (1993) designed a Responsible Pet Ownership Neighbourhoods Program, which included both education and enforcement. This is reportedly being used very successfully in Florida.

THE RESPONSIBLE DOG OWNERSHIP PACKAGE

In response to requests from local councils, the author has developed a Responsible Dog Ownership kit, the target audience of which is adults and older children. This kit was specifically designed to be delivered to community groups by animal management personnel, thus providing a positive experience for staff and for the public. The development process was in close consultation with senior animal management staff from several South-east Queensland local authorities. Topics include:

- duty of care;
- why register;
- the animal management section;
- council bye laws;
- selecting a dog;
- keeping your dog healthy;
- dog behaviour and control;
- home training.

Councils are encouraged to include local issues in dog management. The kit contains owner handouts, a presenter's guide, transparencies and slides. Training in its use will be provided by Ithaca College. A supporting video, dealing with management, rather than *formal* training, of the family dog has been produced by the Queensland Local Government Industry Training Council.

CONCLUSION

Local government and obedience clubs are both committed to assisting dog owners to manage and control their pets. Unfortunately, in many instances, there is little consultation between these groups and with dog owners to determine the course which will best achieve this result. Owners wish to learn to control their dog and improve its behaviour. Councils wish for owners to properly confine their dogs and reduce barking by those dogs. By discarding preconceived ideas, establishing channels of communication and responding to the needs of the community, obedience clubs and local authorities can work together for the benefit of all.

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In my high school and undergraduate days I bred, showed and trained dogs, and became interested in dog behaviour. After gaining my veterinary degree I worked in my own mixed practice for 10 years. Then in 1983 I qualified as a teacher and began teaching veterinary nursing at Ithaca TAFE College. Ithaca College has conducted an in-service course for animal control officers for several years, and my teaching contact with these students (supplemented by contact with advocates of responsible pet ownership such as Dick Murray and Jenny Brennan) introduced me to the problems of urban animal management. In 1990 our section ran a short intensive course for RSPCA refuge workers and a close working relationship with that organisation ensued. This has enabled me to view at first hand the results of lack of planning and responsibility in pet ownership. Early in 1992 I developed and taught a course for dog obedience instructors on dog behaviour and training. Also in 1992 I joined a steering committee to introduce a course in responsible pet ownership into Queensland primary schools. I fervently believe that animal control will be just that, control, unless we work at changing attitudes towards pet ownership. Only then will the subject become animal management.

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APPENDIX 1

NOVICE OBEDIENCE TEST FORMAT

- 1. Heel on Lead**
- 2. Stand for Examination**
- 3. Heel Free (off lead)**
- 4. Stand Stay**
- 5. Recall**
- 6. 1 Minute Sit Stay**
- 7. 3 Minutes Down Stay**

All exercises are marked for correctness of execution. The dog is expected to heel perfectly at the owner's side, obeying each command promptly. The Stay exercises are conducted in a group of up to 10 dogs, spaced at least a metre apart. Handlers remain on the opposite side of the ring from the dogs.

To gain the *Companion Dog* title, the dog must qualify at 3 trials (a qualifying score is 170 out of a possible 200). To gain such a score, the dog must not only perform each exercise without a major error, but also commit very few minor errors (crooked sits, failure to sit automatically, lagging etc).

APPENDIX II

THE AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB'S CANINE GOOD CITIZEN TEST

Each test is graded pass or fail. All tests must be passed to obtain the award of Canine Good Citizen.

1. Accepting a friendly stranger

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This test demonstrates that the dog will allow a friendly stranger to approach it and speak to the handler in a natural, everyday situation. The evaluator and handler shake hands and exchange pleasantries. The dog must show no sign of resentment or shyness and must not break position or try to go to the evaluator.

2. Sitting politely for petting

This test demonstrates that the dog will allow a friendly stranger to touch it while it is out with its handler. The evaluator pets the dog and then circles the dog and handler. The dog must not show shyness or resentment.

3. Appearance and grooming

This practical test demonstrates that the dog will welcome being groomed and examined and will permit a stranger to do so. It also demonstrates the owner's care, concern and responsibility. The evaluator inspects the dog, then combs or brushes the dog and lightly examines the ears and each front foot.

4. Out for a walk (walking on a loose leash)

This test demonstrates that the handler is in control of the dog. The evaluator may use a pre-plotted course or may direct the handler/dog team by issuing instructions or commands. There must be a left turn, a right turn and an about turn, with at least one stop in between and another at the end. The dog need not be perfectly aligned with the handler and need not sit when the handler stops.

5. Walking through a crowd

This test demonstrates that the dog can move about politely in pedestrian traffic and is under control in public places. The dog and handler walk around and pass close to several people. The dog may show some interest in the strangers, without appearing over exuberant, shy or resentful.

6. Sit or down on command/Staying in place

This test demonstrates that the dog has training, will respond to the handler's commands to sit and down and will remain in the place commanded by the handler (sit or down position, whichever the handler prefers). The handler may take a reasonable amount of time and use more than one command.

7. Praise/Interaction

This test demonstrates that the dog can be calmed easily following play or praise and can leave the area of this test in a mannerly fashion. The handler may use verbal praise, petting, playing with a toy and/or a favourite trick in the allowed 10 seconds of play, and then must calm the dog for the next test.

8. Reaction to another dog

This test demonstrates that the dog can behave politely around other dogs. Two handlers and their dogs approach each other from a distance of about 3 metres, stop, shake hands and exchange pleasantries, and continue on for about 2 metres. The dogs should show no more than a casual interest in each other.

9. Reactions to distractions

This test demonstrates that the dog is confident at all times when faced with common distracting situations. The dog may express a natural interest and curiosity and may appear slightly startled, but should not panic, try to run away, show aggressiveness or bark.

10. Supervised isolation

This test demonstrates that a dog can be left alone, if necessary, and will maintain its training and good manners. Evaluators are encouraged to say something like "Would you like me to watch your dog while you make your call?" to add a touch of reality and accentuate the fact that leaving a dog tied and unsupervised is not condoned. The dog will be attached to a 2.5 metre line for 3 minutes and does not have to stay in position but should not continually bark, whine, howl, pace unnecessarily or show anything other than mild agitation or nervousness.