

Healthy relationships

The relationships we have with our dogs change over time, depending on what stage we're at in our own lives. **Lez Graham** explains why the most important thing, at all times, is to get the balance right.

To be in a healthy relationship with your dog, you need to take the lead and make the decisions for him.

I class myself as one of the fortunate folk that were lucky enough to grow up with a dog – after the age of 13, that is, before then, I walked the neighbourhood dogs and played with the dogs at the stables where I used to ride.

When I was 13 my sister's dog had a litter of pups and between us we managed to convince my dad to let me bring home my lovely Kym (or Candy as she was known while she was still with the litter). Kym went with me everywhere but school, she came to the stables after school, hung out with me on a weekend and slept on my bed.

Training Kym was one of the best things I did as a teenager and I was always looking to do new things with her, from walking along the tops of walls and jumping from gatepost to gatepost (much to the annoyance of my neighbours), and even doing that while carrying a raw egg in her mouth, to teaching her tracking and how to walk to the side of a horse. Then, when I left school, she came to work with me. She very rarely left my side until I had to work away from home and couldn't take her with me.

WORLD OF DIFFERENCE
My next dog was a 'top goo', that is, I rescued him with the intention of retraining and rehoming him to the attachment wasn't quite the same. I couldn't wait until I was able to have another dog and had planned to get one once

I'd bought my own place – but then I met my husband, we moved to Australia and getting another dog had to wait until after I had my son.

Once I did get a new dog, the experience was so, so different from having my childhood pal. Because I worked, albeit from home, and had a family to look after, my dog really was last in line, not in a bad way but in a 'pecking order' way. With Kym she came first for everything – I greeted her first and said goodbye to her last, I missed her the most when I wasn't with her; she was my best friend, my confidante, my protector and my 'baby'.

I love my other dogs – if anything, more than I did Kym – but in a different way, I'm their protector. Although, I'm sure, my dogs would defend me to the death, I look on my role to them as their leader, protecting them and keeping them safe – safe from traffic, household dangers, other dogs and so on – giving them the freedom to exercise and 'be a dog' but not letting them out of my sight knowing that, like children, if they're out of sight they could be hurt or be getting up to mischief. I know that in the way I had to make the decisions for my son when he was younger, I have to make the decisions for my dogs rather than letting them make decisions for me.

Just as we have many types of relationships with other humans, so too do we have many different types of relationships with our dogs and, depending on what stage of life you're at, this will

probably determine the type of relationship you have with your dog. My relationship with my childhood dog was very different to the one I have with the two dogs living at my feet now, no doubt when I enter old age that relationship will have changed again.

A DOG OF YOUR OWN
When you first get your own place, since the novelty of going out with your mates and coming home at all hours wears off, a lot of us look for companionship – often in the form of a cat or a dog or other pet of some sort. For me, dogs make the perfect companions; they're always pleased to see you, they get you out and about walking and meeting other members of the community, they look after the house while you're at work and they always listen to what you have to say and manage to look intelligent while doing so.

What can, and often does, happen, however, is that the line between human and dog becomes a bit blurred and the owner starts to think that the dog really does understand every word that's being said, rather than picking up on an occasional word, unconsciously conditioned through consistent repetition.

The owner might start spoiling the dog and, as with children, there's spoiling and then there's spoiling... The first is with love and fulfilling their needs; the second is (continued on page 64...)



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giving them what they want and fulfilling your own needs. The first will give great joy and bring balance to the relationship; the second, depending on the personalities involved, may well damage it.

A simple comparison is a child who is constantly asking for sweets and being demanding; rather than teaching the child self control by making them wait and then rewarding them with the sweets, a parent may give in for a quiet life or to save embarrassment. All the child learns is that being demanding gets rewards – so why should they practise self control? Likewise, if your dog sits in front of you while you're eating your dinner, gazing intently at the food and then at you, if you give in and feed the dog something from your plate you set yourself up to be drooled over every night – worse, in fact, since you're telling your dog that he can control your behaviour just by looking at you. However, if you teach your dog to go to his bed when you eat, consistently put him there and reward him when he stays,

with a few nights he'll learn self control and, more than likely, go to his bed of his own accord and sleep while you eat. It is harder to reinforce basic house rules when you live on your own! In some ways, yes, an it's entirely down to you; in other ways, definitely not, as you don't know what other people are doing with your dog when you're not around.

BEFORE THE KIDS ARRIVE...

Sometimes, in homes where couples haven't experienced the responsibility of having children and all that it entails, the dog may become 'the baby' and end up being 'mummied' by one or both owners. Although many, many couples have really well-balanced houses, with dogs who are beautifully behaved and a complete asset to society – which, let's face it, is all anybody wants for their dog or their child – as a canine behaviour practitioner I tend to see the cases where it's all gone a bit pear-shaped.

Sometimes, problems are put down to a mismatch of temperaments but, for the most

part, trouble occurs when the humans contradict each other's self control and, more than likely, go to his bed of his own accord and sleep while you eat.

So, for example, the wife is relaxing on the sofa and the dog has snuggled up to her, then husband comes home and immediately wants the dog off. The tension may make the dog cringe towards the wife, the wife may cuddle the dog tighter and defend the dog being on the sofa, and so on. The end result, as no doubt you've guessed, is the dog growling or, worse, going for the husband. It's a surprisingly common occurrence, especially in the bedroom, and might not bode well for the marriage.

...AND WHEN THE KIDS GO

More often than not, once the children have grown up and left, the 'empty nest' can be the perfect home to bring a dog into – not just for the dog, but for the owner too. It's another little soul to care for, to talk to, to encourage you both to get out and about for lovely peaceful walks and maybe the odd romantic one.

Like all the other life stages in terms of our relationships with our dogs, this time can be fraught, however. If they're

missing the kids, an owner's potential neediness can be transferred to the dog making him feel self important or, in the case of a timid or nervous dog, stressed by all the extra attention.

Things that might have irritated you about your partner in relation to your kids (slipping them sweets when Mum wasn't looking or getting them overexcited before bedtime) can be just as irritating when they're being done to your dog, such as sneaking food under the table, or playing rough and tumble with an already over-excited dog.

Owning a dog means many things to many families and fulfils so many needs: friendship, companionship, love, a walking partner, someone to talk to, another living being that cares about you – the list goes on.

Providing you view dog ownership as raising a member of society, apply a bit of common sense and have balance in the relationship, there really is no right and wrong. However, when things are thrown out of kilter for whatever reason, then you owe it to your dog to redress the balance and restore the living environment to one that satisfies your dog's needs – for leadership, house rules, basic training, exercise, fun and love.

Later in life, with the family grown up, a dog can become both a companion and an excellent motivator for long, outdoor walks!



About the author

Lez Graham works full-time as a canine behaviour practitioner and grading trainer; she is the education and development officer with the Guild of Dog Trainers and is a tutor with the Cambridge Institute of Dog Behaviour & Training. Lez has just published her first book, *The Pet Cloning*.