The ‘Good Manners’ or ‘Learn to Earn’ Programme

[Whilst this sheet refers to dogs, this programme is applicable to cats and other species.]

This is the most important part of your relationship with your dog, as it will provide a solid foundation for training and for your dog to form a trusting relationship with you. It does not matter if your dog is a puppy of only eight weeks and does not have any problem behaviours, or if this is part of a behaviour modification programme. Either way, this programme is kind, effective and *for life.*

The idea of this programme is to develop the relationship with your dog into one of your being its guide and guardian. You are the benevolent leader and decision maker. This will not involve using any force or aggression. You will have control of all the things that are important to the dog, the ‘goods for sale’ that it can now ‘earn’. These may include food, toys, *and* your attention, and other things such as going through doorways, having its lead put on or taken off, having a ball thrown, getting on your lap/sofa, etc.

One area of particular importance is your attention. Your attention is very important to your pet and it soon learns what works to get it. This may be a behaviour you want, or something you have unwittingly taught and did not want, such as barking at you or pawing. However, often we place little if any importance onour attention and tend to ‘give it away freely’ to our pets, making them work for/earn a food treat but not a stroke or a cuddle. If you place so little importance on it, then so will your dog, and your role as decision maker will slip. The dog will be less inclined to want to work with you, as it does not have to! After all, it can get your attention whenever it wants.

This programme is similar to teaching children to say please and thank you – a good manners programme. It involves three simple rules and has three main outcomes: to reduce anxiety in your pet; to increase obedience and willingness to work with you; and to increase mental stimulation.

**‘Learn to Earn’ programme rules**

To summarize: we humans have ‘ownership’ of good things, the ‘goods for sale’. Dogs have to earn (as we have to say ‘please’) these in some way, but you decide and ask for the behaviour that will be the ‘price’. To do this, the following rules must be adhered to:

1. Human ***starts*** interactions. Say the dog’s name, tell it what you want it to do.
2. If it does the behaviour, it gets the ‘goods’.
3. Human ***finishes*** all interactions. Remember: end the interaction with the word(s) ‘finish’ or ‘that’s enough’.

Additional points:

1. Ignore your dog’s attempts to start interactions orprolong interactions.
2. Do **not** use a word like ‘OK’ for the finish word; the finish word must be a word that is not used frequently in other contexts – i.e. in normal human conversation. Only in this way will it remain a clear cue for your dog that the interaction is ended and it is free to do something else.

**Outcomes of the Learn to Earn programme**

By using three clear and simple rules you provide an easily understandable structure to the relationship. This means your pet’s interactions with you, and everyone else who uses this programme, become a predictable part of your dog’s environment. It can now predict – that is know – when you want to interact with it and when you do not. Being able to have such clear communication means it can be **more relaxed** as it knows what to expect.

**Increased obedience** and **willingness to work** occur because the dog is being rewarded every time, as everything it wants (and previously would have just taken, or been given for free) now becomes a reward for doing what is asked, be that to sit, give a paw, bark, roll over, walk on a loose lead, etc.

Finally, this programme means you are providing ***mental stimulation*** … ‘fun time with my owner, using my brain!’ Within the programme you are in charge of your dog’s ‘stock market’, so you can change the ‘price’ of things. For example, let’s say we are going to throw the ball; the first throw might be worth a ‘sit’; the second a ‘sit’ and a ‘shake paw’; the third is free; the fourth is worth a ‘down’.

**What are the ‘goods for sale’, the rewards?**

Basically, anything your dog enjoys. Start making a list of these, such as having its lead put on/taken off; the back door opened for it; getting up on the sofa next to you. All of these can and should be preceded by you asking for a behaviour such as ‘sit’. In this way, your dog will learn manners and have an owner on whom it can depend in a fun and well-bonded manner.

Three obvious rewards are **food**, **toys** and **attention**, and we will consider these in a little more depth now.

**FOOD**

You might like to consider that all your dog’s food actually belongs to you (after all, you paid for it!). This is as true for its dinner as it is for any treats. So, as you would for a child, ask the dog to say ‘please’ before giving it its food, or indeed any treats. You can do this by instructing ‘sit’, ‘down’, ‘stay’, ‘shake paw’, or any other command it knows.

**TOYS**

Like food, remember that all of your dog’s toys also belong to you. It is a good idea to keep all of its toys in a toy box so that you have control over their use. You can select toys to give to the dog when you wish, and put them away again when you want to. You should always **leave one or two toys out**, so the dog has something to chew and do, but these can be varied. You will probably find that your dog will actually be moreenthusiastic about its toys when you implement this rule. As we know, things that we cannot have all the time are more exciting than things that are always available.

**YOUR ATTENTION**

This is the resource that most people forget to control, and it is also often the resource that the dogs want most. Dogs are social animals, and your attention is very important to them. It is important to remember that your attention, along with all other important resources such as food and toys, also belongs to you. It should be **you**who decides when to give it and when to take it away. There are no restrictions at all as to how many times you interact with your dog during the day – in fact, the more times the better, **but** it is important that **you** start and finish every interaction.

If your dog comes to you to ask for attention at other times, it should be ignored (unless it is in clear distress such as in pain or needing to go out to the toilet, or you have been so wrapped up in your phone that you have ignored it for hours). Ignoring includes not making eye contact. Although it is sometimes nice that your dog comes up to say hello, for those dogs that are controlling their owners, it is important that such behaviour is ignored so that the dog learns the new rules. To start with, when you ignore its advances, you will find that its response will be to try harder. Your dog has always had a response from you, and now doesn’t get it. This is rather frustrating for the dog, who will do its particular attention-seeking behaviour more, or even new behaviours, in order to try to get your attention. This can be very difficult to ignore, but it **must** be ignored for the message to get through. Once the dog has given up and left you alone, call it back and give it that attention, and cuddles.

**Remember: this is not a ‘no attention’ programme but an ‘owner in control of attention’ programme.**

As with the food and toys, your dog has to earn your attention also. When you call it to you, it may be that coming when called is enough. On other occasions, you may also ask for one of the cues you have taught, such as ‘sit’, ‘shake paw’ or ‘down’ before it gets a cuddle.

**Finally…**

Teaching your dog more cues means that you have more to use in the learn to earn. These can be any behaviour that it can do. Whether you wish to think of them as tricks or not is not important; from the dog’s point of view there is no real difference. The dog does not understand the word ‘sit’ *per se*, but when it hears this noise, it puts its bottom on the ground and gets a reward. Some of us think of non-useful behaviours as a ‘trick’, but actually all these on-cue behaviours are useful in enhancing your relationship with your dog and your dog’s mental life.

The other thing that is worth mentioning is to *reward behaviours that you want, and ignore behaviours that you don’t want*. Following this rule will mean that behaviours that you want will become more frequent and other behaviours will decrease in frequency.

The Learn to Earn programme is essential in preventing behaviour problems. It is also part of many behaviour modification programmes, particularly where dogs are controlling situations or showing attention-seeking behaviours. By using this programme in a whole range of contexts for a whole range of rewards, the dog is going to learn not to be so attention-seeking. Remember, this is not a programme of no interaction; rather it is a programme of increased *quality* of interaction. This, in turn, will lead to increased frequency as you and your dog find being around each other so much more pleasurable.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If you are having a problem with your pet’s behaviour, there may be various reasons, which need to be considered, including medical issues. You should contact your veterinary practice or the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (www.abtc.org.uk) for further advice and help.