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The Educated Dog

When you feel frustrated with your dog's behavior, remember that someone must teach a dog what is acceptable behavior and what is not. A dog that hasn't been given any instructions, training or boundaries can't possibly know what you expect of him. By teaching your dog how you want him to behave, you'll not only have a saner household, but a healthier and happier dog as well.

An Educated Dog:

Allows you to handle every part of his body, to check for injury or illness and to give him medication.

Has good manners, so he can spend most of his time indoors with his people. That means more supervision, less boredom and fewer opportunities for dangerous mischief. The more time you spend with your dog, the more likely you'll be to notice when something is wrong with him, like a limp, a cough, a sensitive area or a loss of appetite. By recognizing such irregularities early, you can seek medical attention immediately and, hopefully, prevent more serious problems.

Wants to stay near you, listening for instructions (and praise). This means he'll have less opportunity to stray into danger.

Will walk or run beside you on a leash without pulling, dragging or strangling, so you and your dog can get more exercise and spend more time together.

Knows that "drop it" and "leave it alone" are phrases that mean business, so he'll have fewer opportunities to swallow dangerous objects. He also can be taught what things and places are out of bounds, like hot stoves, heaters or anxious cats. However, you'll still need to limit his access to dangerous places when you cannot supervise or instruct him.

Will "sit" immediately, simply because you say so. No matter what danger may be imminent, a dog that is suddenly still is suddenly safe. And a dog that will "stay" in that position is even safer.

Understands his boundaries, knows what's expected of him and has fewer anxieties. Less stress means a healthier dog.

By training your dog, you can help prevent tragedy and develop a better relationship with him. Keep in mind, however, that even an educated dog needs supervision, instruction and boundaries -- sometimes even physical boundaries. Allowing your dog, no matter how educated he may be, to walk, run or roam outside of a fenced area or off of a leash, is putting him in danger.

Here are some tips to help you select an obedience class that's right for you:

- ✓ Good obedience instructors are knowledgeable about many different types of training methods and use techniques that neither the dogs nor their owners find consistently unpleasant.
- ✓ Good training methods focus primarily on reinforcing good behavior and use punishment sparingly, appropriately and humanely. Excessive use of choke chains or pinch collars or using collars to lift dogs off of the ground ("stringing them up") are not appropriate or humane training methods.
- ✓ Good obedience instructors communicate well with people and with dogs. Remember that they're instructing you about how to train your dog.
- ✓ Specific problems you may have with your dog may not be addressed in a basic obedience course.
- ✓ If you're seeking help with house soiling, barking, aggression or separation anxiety, ask if the course covers these issues -- don't assume it will.
- ✓ Ask the instructor what training methods are used and how they (the instructor and staff) were trained. Also ask to observe a class before you commit to one. If you're refused an observation, or if your observation results in anything that makes you uncomfortable, look elsewhere.
- ✓ Avoid anyone who: guarantees their work; whose primary methods focus on punishment; or who want to take your dog and train him for you (effective training must include you and the environment in which you and your dog interact).