

Getting Real With Your Dog

One of the most frequent sources of frustration in dog training? Unrealistic expectations. Dogs' intelligence shines through in so many ways that we tend to ascribe them decidedly human cognitive skills, such as the ability to understand complex sentences. It's what some dog trainers refer to as "the Lassie syndrome." If you often find yourself frustrated with your dog, here's a primer on what it takes to create a Lassie:

Patience. One basic training class won't do it. The calm, attentive pooches you see on TV picking up slippers and opening doors? They have spent years in training. You wouldn't expect a child to become a piano virtuoso after one semester of classes, right?

Repetition. Dogs don't generalize well. This means they need to learn the same lesson—don't jump on people, for example—in many different settings before they grasp that we'd *always* prefer them to greet visitors politely, not just at home. And when the setting in question is full of tempting distractions, like a dog park, multiply the number of repetitions needed.

Motivation. Motivation is what drives your dog to do things, like respond to your cues—especially the second and third times you ask. And no, contrary to popular belief, making us happy is not a strong motivator for dogs. Common canine motivators include going for car rides, getting a ball tossed, going on walks, playing tug, access to other dogs, access to smells, and—the biggie—food.

Our friendships with dogs work best when they are based on realistic expectations. Why not take a break from the fast-paced, results-oriented mindset of humans and have some fun practicing manners during walks and in your everyday routines? Make it part of your life together, just like walks and baths and teeth cleaning. Your dog will learn faster (even if that's slower than you first hoped) and you will suffer much less frustration along the way.