

LIFE SKILLS ALL DOGS NEED TO LEARN

By Georgia Hymmen

I take care of a large number of other people's dogs on a regular basis in my business of boarding and handling show Danes. I've been blessed with many client dogs who have excellent "life skills" and are a pleasure to deal with. They have learned to go comfortably with other people, be comfortable in a crate and being moved from spot A to B on a kennel lead with no fuss. These dogs are a joy to work with and the time and effort the owner has put into them is evident, especially to other pet care professionals who may need to handle them.

However, I've also found a large number of dogs seem to lack what I call "life skills". If the dog had been taught these skills as a puppy, being handled by other people would be a much less stressful experience for both the dog and the pet care professional. We all know a stressed Dane is a bad thing; some feel excessive stress can bring on bloat. Also, a stressed or frightened dog may snap or bite out of fear or even injure itself trying to escape an unfamiliar circumstance.

A quick poll of pet care professionals I'm acquainted with (consisting of veterinarians, vet techs, groomers, and canine caregivers) showed a very large percentage of their canine clients lacked in "life skills" and exhibited the following issues:

- High anxiety when not with owner.
- Not being crate trained.
- Extreme reluctance to leave owner without a struggle.
- Not being able to properly walk on a collar/lead or kennel lead.
- No training at all.
- Not being familiar with being handled/touched/examined (standing still, having their feet, mouth and body touched).
- Being extremely fearful in new situations.
- Reactive behavior around other dogs.
- Not knowing how to be calm.
- Not knowing how to self-play, exercise and entertain themselves.
- Refusing to eliminate or eat in strange surroundings.

Many of the dogs lacking in "life skills" are beloved pets owned by people who truly care about their Dane and want to do only the best. Unfortunately, many do not realize that they-THE OWNER-are the root cause of the problem. The first problem is the lack of understanding that dogs are a different species than we are. You cannot treat a canine like a human and expect to have a well-rounded and balanced pet. Danes are such personable creatures it's easy to consider them a human family member, but they aren't; they are a canine with a different social hierarchy than we have. And while it might work for a while to treat a puppy as a human, it could go south real fast if you have a big, pushy male hitting puberty who also has never been shown any boundaries.

A prime example is separation anxiety; the dog has never or rarely had to leave the owner. Perhaps it's one of those dogs whose owner works from home and the dog is never left alone, ever. There is no fenced yard so the dog is walked faithfully several times every day, never having any "alone" time. Then suddenly a family emergency comes up and they have to board the dog. The dog is beside himself, pacing, screaming, pawing and chewing at the crate, stress panting, and not eating. This all could have been avoided with proper adaptation training as a youngster and the dog would be much happier—as would the caregiver.

Another problem is the human not requiring the dog do something because "he doesn't like it" or "he's not happy". I can pretty much assume the vast majority of you didn't get to refuse to do something when you were growing up just because you didn't like it! I hated (and still hate) the dentist but all the fussing in the world never got me out of an appointment. As long as it's not dangerous or harmful to the dog, they should be required to follow through with whatever you want them to do whether that is going into the vet's office, loading up in the car, being examined, being groomed or performing in a show ring. I have a "resistance is futile" policy because if a big dog learns he doesn't have to do something, it just isn't going to happen when he's an adult. You don't have to be abusive or hard-handed but you do need to have your dog know he has to follow through with whatever you are asking him to do—and not necessarily so by bribing. A vet exam he doesn't like? He doesn't get a vote. He gets examined. And if he's showing any signs of biting because he's either fearful or aggressive, a muzzle goes on him plain and simple. That's not mean, not abusive, and allows the vet to go over the dog safely and also shows the dog the human can do this; and, maybe it's not so bad after all. AND, it prevents the vet from getting nailed by a scared or aggressive dog which in turn gives our breed a bad name.

As responsible and caring owners who love our pet, we need to provide our dogs with the skills to go through life as a balanced, well-adjusted adult who is comfortable with whatever might happen during his life. Maybe you never plan on leaving your dog BUT emergencies happen. Anyone involved in dogs will tell you the more you do at an early age, the smoother things will go later in life. Many good breeders start their puppies out at a very young age with Puppy Culture or AviDog and other puppy development programs. From there, the owner can take the reins and work with basic training using a qualified and balanced trainer, proper socialization and of course, adaptation training. All are training for different things, and all are very important to help your Dane become a well-balanced adult.

Many owners inadvertently train for bad behavior when petting or telling the dog "it's ok" when they are acting badly. This is called reinforcing negative behavior and should be avoided at all costs as it is NOT a good thing for a dog to learn bad behavior is rewarded.

A few of the life skills a dog needs to know to be comfortable with life include:

Learning to leave his or her owner

Even the most socialized dog in the world can have a problem with this one if he hasn't been taught to go with different people. Easy to teach as a puppy, simply give someone you trust the lead, and have them walk the puppy a few steps away from you. Key is NOT talking to the puppy when the other

person has them and NOT touching, talking or looking at them until they settle upon the return. Another helpful exercise is having the puppy go stay overnight with a friend or trusted dog care professional. Those folks who show in conformation will benefit from sending their puppy to “puppy camp” that some handlers offer. An article I have entitled “How To Avoid Mommy-itis” covers this in more detail.

Learning to rest comfortably and quietly in a crate in a strange location

Perhaps you choose to not use a crate for whatever reason. However, crate training at a young age can help with housebreaking, prevent destruction and give the puppy a quiet place to rest. ALL dogs benefit from crate training and if done when a puppy, they will remember and that will be very helpful if they have to be crated for any reason later in life. This could include if the dog needed to be confined because of surgery or injury, needs to be separated from another pet or family member, an emergency like a flood or fire and crating is required at the shelter, or the owner is traveling and being crated in a motel room would prevent accidental escape.

Learning to play and entertain himself

A dog that is always with his human rarely knows how to go out into a safe area and play and entertain himself. I feel this is an important skill, because self-play can burn off a lot of energy and teach the dog he doesn't have to be joined at the hip with his human at all times. A teenager who doesn't get enough exercise to burn off that energy can convert this into bad behavior. I'm not saying turn the dog out unattended for a long period of time; simply have him in his safe area with lots of interactive toys and check on him frequently. This is one of the many reasons I personally require a fenced yard when I'm selling puppies.

Learning to “do nothing”

Some dogs never learn personal space and always have to be entertained by their humans. They should learn to lie quietly without human interaction. This is a great skill when waiting at the vet's office or an outdoor café that allows dogs. Station training can be quite helpful to start this.

Walking properly on leash

This seems so basic, but very few dogs actually walk calmly on a leash without pulling, lunging, and tugging. No matter what method you use—collar, head halter or harness—your dog should walk calmly by your side, on a loose leash, without pulling. This can take work, especially if the dog has learned pulling you is the norm, and he gets rewarded by getting to whatever he's pulling towards.

Being on a collar

This can be a problem for the dog that is used to a head halter or harness. Most pet care professionals are going to use a kennel lead to move your dog from one spot to the other. If the dog is not familiar with the lead around his neck, he may panic making him hard to control.

Learning To Wear A Muzzle

What? You'd never muzzle your dog, right? Wrong! There could be times your dog must be muzzled, and a dog who has been trained to wear one as a youngster won't think anything of it. Instances in which a muzzle might be used:

- A severely injured dog in pain may lash out and bite a human attempting to offer assistance. A muzzle will protect the human from getting bit. Personally we've had serious human injuries when a dog got a leg caught in a crate; before we got her loose by cutting the crate apart, she caused enough damage to the rescuer's hand that an ER visit was warranted. If we'd put a muzzle on, we would have avoided both the physical and financial pain of the ER visit AND all the questions that come along with a dog bite.
- A dog playing too rough or is too bite-y with other dogs might be able to safely be in a group if muzzled. (This does vary from dog to dog, so should be closely supervised and started out slowly.)
- A dog who needs an exam by a veterinarian or other pet care professional and isn't comfortable have a person in his or her space.
- A dog who has learned using his teeth in certain situations will get the unpleasant situation to stop. An example would be trimming toenails, something many dogs do not like. A Dane must never learn using teeth on a human gets him out of doing something he doesn't like.
- A dog who has pica—some breeds, especially Dobermans, are very bad about eating things that simply should not be eaten. And those things can cause serious and even deadly bowel obstructions. The use of a muzzle allows the dog to have a normal life while preventing ingesting non-food items as opposed to living in a crate with no bedding (which would be the only other option to avoid this).

We never know what life will throw at us, and muzzle training should be added to the list of exercises a well-rounded puppy learns. Melissa Pevy did this short little video of starting her puppies with muzzle training and it shows how accepting—and fun—such training can be. <https://youtu.be/5PjKwco5tU>

Learning to listen

This is a skill that needs to be learned at an early age. If the puppy finds out he can ignore you when you call him or give him a command, he pretty much is going to learn he doesn't have to respond to you. Again, you don't have to be cruel or abusive but you do need to let the puppy know he needs to respond to commands-the first time.

Refusing to Eat or Eliminate In New Surroundings

Dogs are creatures of habit, which is very beneficial when it comes to feeding times, housebreaking and training. A good routine makes puppy training much easier. However, there can be a downside to a routine that never changes—the dog becomes so engrained in a certain routine they simply cannot change.

This holds true with learning to both eat and eliminate in new areas. You may not think this would be a problem, but if your dog has to be boarded, left at the vets, or you are taking him on vacation with you,

it soon can become a big problem. I'm not sure how much you enjoy walking a dog for hours in the pouring rain while on a trip, but I can pretty much tell you I don't. The same goes with eating.

In my article "Beyond Housebreaking" I cover what an owner can do to get their dog used to eliminating anywhere, and hopefully, on command. This is pretty easy to start with as a puppy—you just vary where potty area is AND you do it both on and off leash. Once the puppy is getting the idea, you vary the location a bit. A new location can be your front yard, along the side of your yard—just something different than the norm. It's also a good idea to teach the dog to potty on different surfaces such as gravel, sawdust (used in potty pens at dog shows) and even cement or pavement.

The same holds true with feeding. I feed my dogs in their crate, so if they are crated, they eat. I always have crates when I travel, it's just safer. For the person choosing not to use crates, simply start with feeding the puppy in different locations from time to time. As they get older, step it up and have them do a sleepover with a friend so they can learn to eat while away from home. Also offer some meals when the puppy is just going with you for a ride. Routine feeding times are great, as it helps regulate potty times, but switching the "where" around so they can eat anywhere is good. This is really important for Danes, as they can become brats about eating when they hit the teenage stage and learning good eating habits when young is very important.

While it certainly is easier to teach these skills while a puppy, they CAN be taught with an older dog. It just will take time and one needs to remember to take successes in small steps. Taking the time to teach these life skills will make both you, your dog, and the people who have to handle him much, much happier!

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