

## Getting Your Way



By Peggy Swager  
Author, *Training the Hard to Train Dog*

Having a miniature poodle on your couch doesn't concern most people, but Otis knows he isn't allowed unless I invite him to join me there. However, after we recently asked him to jump on the couch and then jump back off to illustrate a training technique in an aggression video filmed for YouTube, he decided he could take liberties and get on the couch anytime he wanted. That quickly turned into him refusing to get off the couch when he was told to.

So how do I, a dog trainer and behaviorist, go about correcting this problem? First, the behaviorist part of me needs to understand behaviors and mind-sets typical for miniature poodles. Poodles learn and pattern quickly and are routine oriented. They are also very sensitive and will react poorly to harsh techniques. Since Otis learns quickly, I should merely have to tell him "off the couch," since he knows what that command means. What kept that from working for this poodle when other breeds of dogs may choose to comply, is that some poodles prefer to do what they want over the request of their owner, or in my case, the foster owner.

When faced with a dog who refuses to comply, some people believe the solution is to show the dog that the human is

the alpha. The term "being alpha" is associated with using harsh techniques to enforce your status as the one in charge. An alpha roll is an example of a harsh technique used to prove you are the boss. The assumption is that since you are in charge, the dog should naturally do what you tell him to do. There are problems with that idea. The first goes back to Otis' "my way is preferred" nature. Punishment won't change that attitude. The second problem is that Otis' sensitive nature often causes harsh techniques to fail because sensitive dogs will focus on the punishment and not the crime. Harsh techniques can also develop unwanted behaviors such as cringing, running away at your approach and submissive urination. Since this dog is a mill-dog rescue and the first three years of life at a puppy mill were filled with people mistreating him, Otis has additional reasons for me not to use discipline.

When I work with other people's dog issues, I tell them, "To control the dog, you need to be your dog's leader." That means you control all the resources, such as sleeping areas, food, toys and even attention. If I let Otis get away with staying on the couch when I tell him not to, I will not be as strong of a leader. Many people fail with leadership when they don't make a dog comply with a command. Sometimes that happens when people call a dog to come. If the dog wants to visit a person or another dog when you call him and doesn't comply with your command until after he's done what he wants to first, the dog is showing insubordination because he complied on his terms, not yours. This may seem trivial, but to the dog it is not. Not correcting that kind of behavior will cause you to lose leadership value in your dog's eyes.

Dogs often sneak or pilfer privileges a little at a time. Although these behaviors often go unnoticed by the owners, with some dogs they can have a definite impact on the dog's behavior. There are a lot of dogs who will be content with getting away with a few things and will quickly back down when reprimanded. And in all honesty, a little pilfering once in a while can be overlooked, as long as it doesn't cause other behavior issues. However, if you find your dog quits complying with your commands unless the dog happens to feel like it or is bribed with a treat, then you need to do some training to gain more compliance and you need to be more mindful about compliance with that particular dog.

Some dogs who show insubordination will become a behavior problem. Dogs with a more pushy nature are greedy about taking charge in a household and can bowl over owners, becoming unpleasant to live with. Other dogs may develop aggression issues. Although the dog begins by pilfering privileges, once the dog feels empowered he can assert himself by biting either a person or another dog in the household.



Photo by Darak77, iStock.com

This is often the point where the owner calls me for help, thinking the problem suddenly cropped up when it actually grew out of small non-compliances over a period of time.

The first step in reforming Otis was to get him off the couch the same way I did in the video on dog aggression. I used a treat to lure him off with the intention of feeding the treat once I got compliance. Of course after he ate the treat he tried to jump right back up, so I stepped in front of him and blocked him. Finally he gave up, that was until I left the room. Finding Otis once again on the couch, I again tried to lure him off with a treat. He turned his head, sniffed the air and acted as if I wasn't there. Fully understanding he was blowing off my command, I used a bit more force. I picked him up and set him on the floor, while clearly stating "off." That kind of a step is what I call "follow though" with a command. A strong leader will make sure their command is not ignored.

Unfortunately, the next day Otis was again on the couch and again would not get off the couch on command. However, when I reached to pick him up, he jumped down. Since he jumped from the couch so quickly, I knew I didn't need to do anything more forceful to gain compliance so I switched my tactic to insistence. By this time he was willing to get off the couch on command, so I only had to insist he get off the couch a few more times before he abandoned jumping on the couch uninvited.

With sensitive dogs like poodles you need to use positive techniques as much as possible. Begin with using a treat. If that isn't getting you the results you need then find a way to get the result you want without resorting to any kind of punishment. Sometimes the key to getting your way is a combination of persistence and patience.

Peggy Swager is author of the book *Training the Hard to Train Dog*. If you'd like to see Otis in action, you can view her video on dog aggression by doing a search on her name on YouTube. For more information, please visit her website at [www.peggywager.com](http://www.peggywager.com).



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