

# Mind Games — Playing for Confidence and Compliance

By M. Shirley Chong

I do not believe that dogs view human beings as if they were other dogs. However, I am convinced that when humans act in specific ways that dogs usually react in a predictable manner. A handler can use these specific reactions to modify a dog's behavior--to help a fearful dog feel more confident and to influence an uncooperative dog into becoming more biddable.

If your dog shows one or more of the following symptoms, take him to your vet and ask about doing a six function plus TSH thyroid test, before you start the Mind Games. This test usually costs in the neighborhood of \$35-40 plus whatever your vet charges for an office visit and blood draw. In Iowa, vets usually send this blood off to the University of Michigan or to Hemovet in California. As far as I know, there is no lab in the state of Iowa that can run this test. If your dog is hypothyroid, problem behaviors can disappear or become much less pronounced with treatment. Symptoms of hypothyroidism can include:

- inexplicable and persistent weight gain
- inexplicable weight loss
- unusually heavy or thick coat
- unusually sparse coat
- unusually greasy coat
- areas that have been clipped down grow back very slowly or not at all
- generalized all over itchiness
- generally crabby or crotchety attitude
- spaced out some or all of the time
- lethargy or reluctance to exercise
- seems cold most of the time or seeks out warm places
- suddenly fearful of things that weren't a problem previously
- softening of muscle tone even with regular exercise, particularly noticeable in the face

There are a number of leadership programs around, some of them more detailed than others. The following is what has worked for me and for students of mine but it's not written in stone. If any part of the following is too difficult to carry out or might get you bitten, don't do it! You don't have to play all the Mind Games with your dog to get some benefit from the program. The more Mind Games you play, the faster and more dramatic your results will be.

If you are having serious problems with your dog, consult a dog trainer or behaviorist experienced in working with difficult dogs before changing any of your dog's routines.

Note: a houseline is a 6-8 foot length of cord attached to your dog's buckle or limited-slip collar for your dog to drag around the house. Spray it with Bitter Apple (or other anti-chewing product) to keep your dog from removing it.

If this is the first time you've used an anti-chewing product, make sure your dog doesn't accustom himself to the taste by giving him the "shock" treatment with it. Apply some to a cotton ball or tissue. Then go to your dog and gently pop it into his mouth. He'll go YUCK! and spit it out--praise like crazy, that's exactly the reaction you want. You should only have to do this once. Again, if this is likely to get you bitten, don't do it--consult an experienced trainer or behaviorist as soon as possible.

## **Mind Game #1: No More Kibble From Heaven!**

Free feeding is the equivalent of kibble from heaven--some dogs seem to imagine that they own their bowl and that the food appears whenever they want it.

Feed your adult dog twice a day (puppies may need 2-6 meals per day depending on age and health status). Before you put the bowl down, have your dog do a sit. If your dog tries to dive on the bowl before you give him permission to eat, pick up the bowl and start over. When your dog stops eating and walks away from the bowl, pick up any remaining food and dispose of it.

### **Mind Game #2: No Free Lunches!**

Dogs that never have to do anything to earn their living (their food) can become very spoiled. They see no reason to obey their owner at any time because they can get what they want (food) without any conditions at all.

At least four times a week feed your dog his entire meal from your hand. Divide your dog's meal up into 15-25 parts (depending on the size of your dog, this might be anything from individual kibbles to small handfuls). Have your dog perform a simple command for every part of his meal. It doesn't have to be complex--it can be sits, downs, stand, shake hands, salute, roll over, etc.

If your dog is overly rough about how he takes food, work on his eating-from-your-hand skills with his first meal fed this way. If he tries to grab the food roughly from you, pull your hand away, give him a short time out, then offer the food again. If your dog refuses to carry out known commands, quietly put his food away until the next regularly scheduled meal. It's completely up to him whether he eats or not--don't try to convince him. Let him discover where his own best interests lie!

### **Mind Game #3: No More "Pee-Mail"!**

Dogs sometimes use urination and defecation to mark their own territories. Some males are particularly persistent about urine marking as many places as possible (some bitches do this as well). I call this "pee-mail"--dogs send social messages to other dogs with their urine. Dogs do not need to assert their ownership over a large territory; some dogs who mark the same places on a regular basis become quite territorial.

Urine marking is different from regular urination--the dog sniffs something (often a vertical object or a place where another dog has peed), then moves forward a little and sprinkles that place with a few drops of urine.

If your dog is in the habit of marking during walks on lead, take control of his pee-mail. Give him (or her) two chances to urinate at home and then insist that your dog keep up with you during your walk. You may have to use a head halter to give you control over your dog's nose.

### **Mind Game #4: Patience!**

Dogs that are overly pushy and dogs that are too fearful share one important personality trait: they tend to be impatient. They move, act and make decisions too quickly. Having your dog do a thirty minute down stay every day helps teach your dog how to be patient and just relax.

First teach your dog to do a down. Then put him on leash, have him do a down and run the leash under your own foot. Leave your dog enough slack to lie comfortably but not enough to be comfortable sitting or standing.

If your dog gets up, just stay quiet and keep pressure on the leash. Let your dog discover how to be comfortable. Your dog will eventually relax and just hang out.

If you do this regularly, your dog will start to relax sooner and sooner.

### **Mind Game #5: Learning His Place!**

Controlling the best spots to sleep are one of the games dogs play with each other to establish authority. As almost every dog could tell you, the best spots to sleep in any house are the furniture and human beds.

If you are playing Mind Games because your dog lacks respect for you, prohibit your dog from getting up on the furniture and

on your bed. If he doesn't respect your "Off!" command, attach a houseline to move him when he doesn't feel like moving. Don't be harsh, just firm and matter of fact.

If your dog has a favorite place to sleep (a particular corner or dog bed), make sure to take control of that place at least once a day by making your dog move out of it and then sitting or standing in it yourself for a few minutes.

If your dog sneaks up on the bed with you after you fall asleep, put him in a crate or shut him out of the bedroom.

If you are playing Mind Games because your dog is fearful or anxious, it is important to get your dog out of the bedroom. British trainer John Rogerson has noted that he has never seen a case of separation anxiety in a dog that routinely sleeps outside the bedroom. I have seen a few cases of separation anxiety in dogs that didn't sleep in the owner's bedroom but *\*did\** sleep with one or more other dogs. Removing the other dogs did trigger anxiety, so make sure your dog is sleeping in a room alone.

### **Mind Game #6: Taking Back Your Space!**

Dogs can take control of a space by lying in the middle of the traffic pattern or by lying in the doorway. Anxious dogs are trying to prevent their owner from leaving, dogs with leadership ambitions are trying to control their owner's movement. In dog society, the lesser ranked dogs have to move around the higher ranked dogs.

If your dog is lying in your way, shuffle your feet and shuffle right through him. You don't want to hurt him (that's why you're shuffling) but you do want him to move for you.

Don't ask your dog to move or warn your dog that you are about to make him move. Make it your dog's responsibility to keep an eye on you and to move as needed to accommodate you.

If you think your dog might bite you, consult a trainer or behaviorist with experience dealing with aggressive dogs ASAP! In the meantime, put a buckle or limited-slip collar on your dog and attach a houseline. Use the houseline to move your dog.

### **Mind Game #7: Follow the Leader!**

Teaching your dog to follow you teaches your dog to keep an eye on you and to accommodate your movements. You're an important person in your dog's life and if he doesn't know it, it's time for him to learn it.

Tie your dog's leash to your belt or around your waist for at least one hour each day. Go about your every day business without paying particular attention to your dog. Don't warn your dog you are about to move, don't pay attention to your dog, don't coax him to come with you. Make it his responsibility to follow his leader (you!) around.

It's inconvenient to do--but the more often you can do this, the faster you will see a change in your dog's behavior.

### **Mind Game #8: Take Control of Your Dog's Body!**

Dogs prefer to be touched on their own terms. Some dogs want to be petted constantly and some dogs would prefer only to be handled by invitation only.

If your dog solicits petting constantly, stop all free petting. Insist that your dog earn each petting session by performing one or more commands and keep each petting session short in duration.

If your dog doesn't enjoy being handled, make sure that you handle your dog all over every day. Make sure you can touch and examine every part of your dog's body, including his ears and between his pads.

If it gives you more confidence in handling, wear gloves until you feel safe handling your dog. If you think there is a high probability that your dog will bite you, seek professional help!

### **Mind Game #9: S/he Who Owns the Most Toys Wins!**

In dog society, the dog able to control the most resources is usually the highest ranked. Giving a dog lots of toys that no one else touches can give that dog a mistaken impression of his own rank in the world. Overly confident dogs can become aggressive resource guarders and overly fearful dogs feel stressed by the enormity of their responsibilities.

Pick up and put out of your dog's reach all of the toys, including chew toys. Hold one play session per day with your dog where you bring out one toy and use it to play with your dog for 10-15 minutes.

If your dog declines to play with you, put the toy away without comment.

### **Mind Game #10: Daily Chores!**

Remind your dog that he works for his living by holding two short daily obedience sessions. For 5-10 minutes in each session, run through all the commands your dog knows or teach him new ones.

These can be combined with hand feeding sessions.

### **Mind Game #11: A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body!**

Dogs need physical exercise to stay physically and mentally healthy. Make sure your dog is getting 30 minutes of aerobic exercise every other day. Aerobic exercise is any exercise that makes your dog pant steadily. Depending on your dog's size and fitness level, this can be on lead walking, jogging, road work, treadmill, retrieve games, swimming or pulling.

It's difficult for many people to walk fast enough to give a medium or large dog aerobic exercise (any dog over about 25 pounds). If on lead walking is the only option, you can increase the oomph factor by teaching your dog to pull a drag from a nonrestrictive harness. I start small with loops of rope and work up to motorcycle tires (depending on the size and condition of the dog). This has an added advantage for conformation people of building the dog's rear.

Avoid retrieve games if your dog doesn't play nicely. Playing nicely means respecting your space when you have possession of the object (in other words, not leaping on you to rip it out of your hands), bringing the object directly back to you and allowing you to take the object out of his mouth.

Make sure your dog is getting a high quality diet with moderate amounts of protein and fat. I believe that a homemade diet based on raw ingredients (meats and veggies) is healthiest for dogs. There are high quality kibbles on the market for those who prefer to feed a commercial diet. Money saved on cheap kibble often gets spent at the vet, so there's no point in trying to economize with cheap dog food.

### **Mind Game #12: Rewards From Daily Life!**

All dogs have things that they enjoy doing. Earning these daily pleasures can help your dog learn confidence and compliance.

It might include things like going out in the yard, going for a walk, being fed, going for a ride in the car, being groomed, being petted, getting scratched in that spot that is always itchy, etc. Before you let your dog have any of the things on that list, have your dog perform a known command, then reward him with the intended activity. If he refuses to do the behavior, don't comment, just walk away, wait for five to ten minutes and try again.

Play as many of the Mind Games as you can for at least a month. If your dog's attitude has improved, slowly start dropping some of the games. I recommend that you keep the first game (No More Kibble From Heaven!) and the last game (Rewards From Daily Life!) for life. You may decide to keep playing more or all of the games. If your dog's attitude starts to get worse again, re-institute the game you most recently dropped for at least another month.

## **Mind Games Checklist**

- “ Medical exam, including thyroid check
  
- “ Mind Game #1: No More Kibble From Heaven!
- “ Mind Game #2: No Free Lunches!
- “ Mind Game #3: No More “Pee-Mail”!
- “ Mind Game #4: Patience!
- “ Mind Game #5: Learning His Place!
- “ Mind Game #6: Taking Back Your Space!
- “ Mind Game #7: Follow the Leader!
- “ Mind Game #8: Take Control Of Your Dog’s Body!
- “ Mind Game #9: S/he Who Owns the Most Toys Wins!
- “ Mind Game #10: Daily Chores!
- “ Mind Game #11: A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body!
- “ Mind Game #12: Rewards From Daily Life!