

Teach Your Dog to Go Say Hi

Long ago, when you were a small child, your parents probably told you how to greet your family members when they came to visit you. They probably told you to go give your grandparents a hug and a kiss, to not kick your cousins and to be careful not to trip over Aunt Edna's cane.

Similarly, your dog's family taught him how to greet when he was a puppy. You should lick your elders' lips, you should be face level when you say hi, and be sure to respectfully sniff Aunt Edna's butt.

When your dog does all of the greeting behaviors he was taught, he thinks that he's doing everything right. But how does he know that he's doing anything wrong? Suddenly everyone is jumping up and down, barking and trying to stop him from respectfully acknowledging Aunt Edna.

If you want your dog to act differently during a situation, it's your responsibility to teach him what you need. If you want him to sit on the floor and wait for people to come up to him, you need to teach him how. If you want him to go into the living room and turn off the lights so that you can hide, you have to teach him that, too. If you don't teach him what you want, he's going to do what he learned earlier.

Your dog wants to do whatever his pack is doing, he wants to fit in and do the right thing. But, he can't read your mind, so you have to teach him what's expected in each new situation. That's why we teach a command called Go Say Hi.

This command puts you in charge...of everything. You have to take control of both your dog and of Aunt Edna. For example, Aunt Edna comes to the door and starts fawning all over your dog. You have to ask her to step back and tell her what you'd like her to do.

"Aunt Edna, we're training Bluto. Could you help us? I'm going to give you a cookie and ask Bluto to Go Say Hi to you. When he sits in front of you, you can give him the cookie and pet him on the chest. If he starts to jump, just take a step back. Ready?" Then you tell Bluto to Go Say Hi by guiding him to Aunt Edna, and asking him to sit. When Bluto sits, he gets his cookie.

If Aunt Edna is inadvertently encouraging Bluto, you have to speak up. "I'm so glad that you're excited to meet Bluto, Aunt Edna, but can you stop waving your cane up in the air? Bluto thinks you're playing." My 80 year old grandmother once got on the floor and crawled under my dining room table to say hello to my timid German Shepherd puppy. That conversation went "Grams, please let me help you up off the floor, Nora will come to you when she's ready." If there's too much activity, for example the entire side of the family from Arizona is showing up, it might be better for Bluto to be in a room far from the maddening crowd, and to slowly introduce him to one or two people at a time.

Bottom line is you have to teach your dog how to interact with people. You have to show him what's appropriate and what's inappropriate. Encourage him to do what you need with praise and attention. When he's jumping on people, redirect him and reward him when he's doing what you'd like. You're your dog's liaison and interpreter, but if you don't tell him what to do, he's going to do the dance of a thousand sniffs with Aunt Edna.

Written by Sheila of Integral Dog Training in collaboration with Animal Rescue Konnection (c) 2022.