

## Dog Whisperer

Owners encouraged to use rewards for training

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Trainer Barbara Shumannfang and her dog Ruby relax at home. Shumannfang works with dog owners to help them mold better behavior in their pooches. Link: [Top Notch Dog](#)

DURHAM -- Barbara Shumannfang's hand closed around a doggie treat. Cleo, the border collie mix sitting in front of her, wanted that treat. As Shumannfang's hand moved left, Cleo's left paw lifted ever so slightly off the floor as her fuzzy snout reached for a treat. Shumannfang had more treats in her hand, and Cleo wanted them. So the next time the treat holder's hand moved left, Cleo lifted her paw again, this time a little higher. The dog was on her way to learning how to "shake."

Just a few minutes of training, and Cleo was already making her owners proud. Durham residents Bruce and Barbara Jentleson brought Cleo home from the Animal Protection Society of Durham about two weeks ago. Within a few days of adopting her, they asked Shumannfang for assistance in training the 1-year-old.

Cleo's not the only dog that has benefited from Shumannfang's help. Like Cesar Millan on the National Geographic Channel show "Dog Whisperer," Shumannfang goes to her clients' homes to observe, advise and train dogs.

"That show has done a lot to popularize the idea that if your dog is doing something to drive you nuts, you can do something about it," she said. But her dog whispering doesn't require a televised disclaimer. Everything she teaches owners and dogs is about positive reinforcement.

"For me, reward-based training is so effective, so fast, so powerful -- why not use it?" she said.

### **Power of treats**

Behold the power of treats. It worked for Cindy Wright, a former client of Shumannfang. Wright's English springer spaniel, Oscar, was an obsessive shadow chaser. When Wright took him out on walks at night, the puppy chased shadows. Inside, he was obsessed with reflections.

"Barbara suggested we distract him with treats," said Wright, who lives in Mebane. "She focused on positive training. We gave him a treat and said, 'Good boy.' It took a couple of months. She encouraged us to exercise him more. It was just reinforcing that [shadow chasing] was not what we wanted him to do, along with exercise and toys."

Behavior that Wright described as "beyond being cute" is no longer an issue. Now 3 years old, Oscar only occasionally follows a shadow cast by a bird or leaves on a tree.

Shumannfang helped Kate Miller's family with the adjustment of adding a dog to a household with children. Miller's Pembroke Welsh Corgi puppy, Lucas, was jumping and nipping. Miller said her children learned how to stand like a tree to discourage jumping and how to teach Lucas to play fetch. Another tool Shumannfang gave the Millers was a way to keep Lucas from disrupting breakfast time for the kids. Miller puts Lucas' dog food in a toy maze that keeps him occupied and entertained by his own breakfast while the family ate theirs.

### **New tricks**

Dogs are quick learners. Conditioning a dog only takes about three minutes a day, Shumannfang told the Jentlesons on a recent Friday afternoon. In addition to working with Cleo on learning a trick, they worked on the commands sit-

stay and come. Cleo picked up on Shumannfang's techniques pretty fast both with the trainer and the Jentlesons. An earlier visit focused on Cleo's adjustment to staying in the laundry room when she is home alone.

Shumannfang's keys to a happy dog in a happy family are trust, clear communication and boundaries. The earlier the better. You can in fact teach an old dog new tricks, she said, but the longer a certain behavior has been going on, the harder it is to change it.

The trust factor is about positive reinforcement. "There's science behind reward-based training," she said. "I think anybody, including a dog, likes knowing they won't be hurt or scared. Dogs thrive when there are boundaries." Those boundaries and rules must be consistent, too, she said.

"My most common call is: 'My dog won't listen.' I show them that with your voice you're saying 'come,' but by leaning forward, your body language is saying 'get out of my space,'" Shumannfang said.

"People think it's rude when dogs jump up and drool. Dogs think it's rude when people make eye contact or hug them," she said. Hugs are a threatening gesture to dogs, she said. Most dogs don't like getting petted on the head, either. They might tolerate it, she said, like a child tolerates an older relative pinching his or her cheeks. That's about the equivalent comfort level. But dogs who want affection will take the head pat, then show only subtle signs of stress like a yawn, flick of the tongue or turning away.

One couple Shumannfang worked with wanted their dog to come on cue. The dog came right when called, but stopped short before one owner. It turned out that the dog did not want the resulting pat on the head, so it stayed out of arm's reach.

"I try to translate for the dog," Shumannfang said. The way to show affection for a dog is to rub under its chin or on its chest. She finds the process "endlessly fascinating. I never get tired of it," she said. Shumannfang likes seeing owners learn how to communicate better with their dogs. While she runs a business -- Durham-based Top Notch Dog -- and is the author of "Happy Kids, Happy Dogs," she has a rather un-business enhancing goal: She wants owners to become independent. Instead of calling her when they encounter a new problem, she wants them to solve it for themselves with tools and techniques they've already learned.

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