

Concept

a powerful, intriguing, inspiring, or perhaps odd idea distilled to its essential elements

Learning emerges from the most unlikely sources. In my case, the source was a dog and the curriculum was a refresher course in communication. When I first met my son's dog Oscar in April, he weighed 60 pounds—a rascally, rambunctious former stray of dubious parentage, indeterminate age, and boundless energy. I gave thanks that he didn't live in *my* house. But in July, despite serious misgivings, I agreed to become the foster master for Oscar while Rod deployed to Iraq with his Army unit.

Into a dissonance between wild dog-ness and hesitant master-ness stepped Ethan, the dog trainer. Now Oscar is finally getting the basics of canine etiquette: to walk calmly on a leash, sit, lie down, come when called, stay, heel. I'm learning to teach him by what I have dubbed, Ethan's edicts:

- Be lavish with and exaggerate your praise for what the dog does right. And the corollary, correct him clearly when he's wrong.
- Only give a command once.
- Never give a command you won't or can't enforce.
- Be consistent.
- Use commands, not tentative questions.

As for useful admonitions to Oscar, when modified a bit they

are transferable to human communication:

- Be positive.
- Be firm about where you stand.
- Mean what you say.
- Don't endlessly repeat.
- Be generous with praise.
- Let people know when their behavior bothers you.

Reducing those habits to the basics, and rehearsing them with dog and trainer, somehow made it easier for me to look honestly at my communication style and to learn from this unlikely source—even when people look at me oddly for saying that dog training holds lessons for parenthood and other forms of communication.

Ethan and his wife just had their first baby, so we'll see if I'm right.

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Seeing Yourself in the Eyes of a Dog

What dog training can teach us about communication basics.



By Shari Dwyer