

HAVING CHOICES

Like all animals, dogs have their own will and need to learn how to deal with situations. This is why it's important that they have choices!

What type of choices are we talking about? It's the choice to behave as they need to behave, without humans meddling.

What benefits for the dog and for you?

- Having choices allows the dogs to dare! It maintains their natural curiosity.
- It stimulates their brain and boosts their learning process.
- When dogs understand that they can choose their reaction, they learn to cope with situations on their own and it reduces their stress level.
- The more your dog can choose, the more confident she gets. Learn to trust your dog's capability to make her own decisions, she will be happier and your relationship will be stronger.

Having choices is necessary for a healthy brain and body, just as with humans!

How to give dogs more choices?

Whenever possible, do not coerce your dog but instead observe her and let her show you what she prefers.



In which situations can we give more freedom to dogs?

During walks

- Let your dog sniff and explore her environment, even if it takes time! In order to do that, the dog must be either free or on a loose leash.
- Whenever possible, let your dog go where she wants to go.
- Let your dog look at passing dogs, and even go closer if everyone agrees. If your dog is stressed when around other dogs, give her the possibility to stop and look or even to curve as far as needed around the dogs to avoid them.

A walk in these conditions is less stressful and far more stimulating for your dog. Your dog is more relaxed: sniffing calmly makes your dog's heart rate decrease.

Interactions with humans

- Let your dog choose when she's ready to come closer to someone: don't make her "say hello"!
- When you're petting a dog, always do it in a way that she can leave if she wants to: for instance, don't hold her.



NB: When you can't avoid contact, for instance at the vet, let your dog sniff around the room before the consultation starts, and let her choose where she wants the consultation to take place (on the table or on the floor): there's always a way to give your dog choices!

At home

- Let her be free of her movements: she should be allowed to move freely in the house, to choose to be near you or isolate herself, to sit, lie down and get up whenever she feels like it.
- Let her sleep as much as she needs, whenever she needs and wherever she wants: set up several different beddings in different places in the house, and at least one raised as dogs feel safer there. But if she prefers the kitchen floor, that's fine!



- Let her choose one toy from several, which bone to chew on, what type of food she prefers, what activity she wants to do... the possibilities are endless!

At first, some dogs might find it difficult to dare to make their own choices: you need to offer them small choices one at a time, and be very patient. For instance, start by giving them the choice between two treats, or between two toys. When they start to feel safer, you can give them more and more choices gradually.

Consequences of having no choice

Some training habits rest on controlling the dog and not letting her choose anything. It can be:

- Constant orders
- Always walking to heel without being allowed to sniff
- Forced contact with other dogs or humans
- Being prevented to go or even to look at other dogs or humans

These habits cause repetitive stress which can lead to:

- Physical diseases
- Behavioral issues such as anxiety or aggressiveness
- In extreme cases, depression (these dogs are apathetic and don't take any initiative)

Giving your dog more choices doesn't mean letting her run wild!

Teaching your dog good manners and giving her the possibility to make choices are two different things and are compatible! The more your dog is free to make her own choices, the more she will be able and willing to learn new things.

You are responsible for your dog: it's your job to teach her to behave in a polite manner. She should be able to live in harmony with other dogs and with human society. And if it means staying away from other dogs for a little while because it is too much, you should respect that. It is also your job to protect your dog.



To go further

- www.pdte.eu
- *Dominance, Fact or Fiction?* (2013) - Barry Eaton
- *On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals* (2009) - Turid Rugaas
- *Stress, Anxiety and Aggression in Dogs* (2012) - Anders Hallgren

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For a confident and happy dog!

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