

This is an article written by Jennifer Summerfield, DVM CPDT-KA. While it describes situations with breeds other than the Lhasa Apso, Dr Jen's advice and training will work with any dog and is especially appropriate for our beloved Lhasa Apsos. How many times are you at a show, and someone approaches your dog on the table and "descends" upon it? This is an opportunity to do some gentle education on how to approach and touch a dog.

Dr Jen's credentials from her website:

Hello, and welcome! I'm a veterinarian and professional dog trainer, with a focus on treating behavior problems including aggression, separation anxiety, and compulsive behavior issues. I also teach group classes and private lessons in basic pet dog obedience, agility, rally, and competitive obedience. My three Sheltie boys (Remy, Gatsby and Clint) compete in a variety of dog sports including AKC conformation, agility, and obedience as well as dabbling in new adventures from time to time.

I created this blog in 2016 to share my passion for all things training-related, provide easily accessible training and behavior information to dog owners, and celebrate my experiences in the strange, wonderful world of dogs and the humans who love them. I hope you'll feel free to join me!

I am proud to be a member of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) and the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT). If you need help finding a qualified trainer or behavior consultant in your area, feel free to get in touch with me – I would be happy to try and point you in the right direction.

Why It's Hard Being Tiny And Cute

Jennifer L. Summerfield, DVM CPDT-KA

<http://www.drjensdogblog.com/why-its-hard-being-tiny-and-cute/>

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Today, I want to talk about little dogs.

I was at a client's home a few weeks ago, doing a behavior consultation for their adorable two-year-old Maltese mix. "Chloe" had a tendency to get over-aroused and begin barking, jumping, and nipping over seemingly benign activities like family members putting on their coats, loading the dishwasher, or using their exercise equipment.

Chloe was a friendly dog who hopped happily onto the couch to greet me as soon as I sat down, and she was greatly excited by having a visitor in the house. On several occasions as we talked, the family's two young daughters came over and scooped her up to snuggle in their arms. Chloe was annoyed by this, as she was busily sniffing my coat and purse and investigating my pockets for treats.

Each time they picked her up, she snarled and air-snapped at their hands. The girls paid her no mind.

Another recent consult was for an elderly miniature dachshund, adopted from a rescue group a few weeks prior to our meeting. "Jojo" was having some trouble getting along with the family's other dog (a puppy who constantly wanted to play), and also showed some aggressive behavior related to handling. In particular, she had a history of biting her owner when he tried to get her out of her warm, comfy dog bed for her morning potty trip. She also sometimes snapped or bit when she was picked up at other times.

When questioned, her owners said they could easily tell when picking Jojo up was likely to be a problem, because she flattened her ears, gave a hard stare, and rolled onto her back when they reached for her. Fortunately, she had very few teeth due to a history of severe dental disease, so she wasn't able to cause any injuries when she tried to bite.

I'm sharing these two examples to kick off our discussion today because they happen to be cases that I saw recently, and are part of what made me think this would be a good topic to cover on the blog. Please note, both of these clients are wonderful owners who love their dogs very much, and take great care of them. They're concerned enough about their behavior issues to seek help from a professional, and were very open to suggestions on different ways to interact with their pups.

My point here is emphatically NOT to frown and shake my head at them for not knowing better. These are perfectly normal, kind, intelligent people, doing normal things that most owners do with their dogs. So if you recognize some of your own habits in these stories, don't feel bad! But I do think it's worth taking a closer look at the way we often relate to small breed dogs, and asking ourselves if we can do better.

So, first things first.

What is the fundamental problem I'm getting at, here?

It might surprise you to know that for virtually all animals, including dogs, having some control over their immediate environment is an important motivator. We all want to have some say over what happens to us at any given moment, and the ability to make behavioral choices that impact our daily life. In fact, many scientists who study animal behavior classify this as a primary reinforcer – something that's intrinsically valuable to the animal, as critical to their overall welfare as access to food or shelter. Something valuable enough to work for.

How does this relate to our discussion today?

It's true that most pet dogs have relatively little control over what happens to them on a daily basis. As the humans in the household, with our big brains and opposable thumbs, we decide when it's time for them to eat, or go for a walk, or kennel up for bedtime. But this is especially, *emphatically* true for tiny dogs like Chloe and Jojo.

With toy breed dogs, we have a tendency to just scoop them up whenever we get the urge to cuddle, or when they're doing something we don't like, or when we want to plunk them in the bathtub or on the grooming table. We also often ignore their attempts to communicate with us when they're frustrated or unhappy, because they're so fluffy and cute – it's hard to take them seriously when they growl or show their teeth!

The result, unfortunately, is that many little dogs resort to more dramatic attempts to get us to listen. This might look like barking, jumping, and nipping to express excitement or frustration – or, it may escalate to biting as a way of saying, "please don't pick me up right now."

So what can we do to solve these problems, or (ideally!) prevent them from developing in the first place?

For Jojo, her owner was able to come up with a perfect work-around for her dog bed issues in the morning. He now feeds her breakfast, which she is eager to get up for, prior to taking her out for her potty walk. Everyone is happy, with no need to physically pull her out of bed. We also discussed teaching her to voluntarily "assume the position" to be picked up when needed, with lots of rewards for choosing to participate.

Chloe is currently learning to go to a specific spot and stay there when exciting things are happening – much better than jumping and nipping! She had no training history of any kind when I met her, but was delighted to learn how to hop onto her designated place and sit in return for tiny pieces of string cheese. Her family is enjoying playing training games with her, and they've been excited to discover what a quick learner she is.

The bottom line?

If you have a tiny dog, think about the world from her perspective. How often do you take the time to ask her what she wants, or engage her cooperation when you need her to do something? Toy breed dogs are just as smart and willing as Labs and Border Collies, and just as trainable.

So next time you want a snuggle, invite her up by patting your lap. If she's barking at the window, teach her to come back to you or go to her mat for a treat, rather than grabbing her and moving her away. Train her to hop onto the grooming table when you ask. You'll both be happier, and have a better relationship – and she's less likely to develop nuisance behaviors to get attention, or aggression issues over handling.

Don't take advantage of her size to bulldoze over her. Don't scoop her up without warning, pin her down for nail trims, or force her to be touched or snuggled by strangers if she doesn't enjoy this. And don't ignore her when she says "please stop."

Relationships are a two-way street, whether your dog is an 80-lb Rottweiler or a 4-lb Yorkie. We all have needs, desires, and feelings that deserve to be respected.

As with so many other things in life, a little empathy goes a long way.

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