

Everything I Needed To Know about Parenting I Learned (Too Late) at Dog Obedience School

By Patrick F. Bassett, NAIS President

At the demise of my last basset, an octogenarian named Buffy, I became disconsolate, and obviously very much in need of a new basset puppy. My wife did not empathize with the gravity of my emotional need and insisted on jointly preparing one of those annoying decision-maker charts of plusses and minuses, her side the minuses, my side the plusses, before proceeding with adding a new family member. Suffice it to say, her side was substantially longer than mine (actually, the only plus I could think of was that I needed someone happy to see me when I came home from work, no matter at what time). Regardless, by cleverly manipulating her into visiting a new litter with me, I prevailed. Although we had the pick of the litter and my wife opined that the comatose pup named Sleepy would be her choice, I selected the more obviously energetic basset pup, 7-weeks old, Scarlett.

Very quickly, Scarlett began demonstrating the behaviors of wooden-headed stubbornness, (indigenous to the breed, my wife unkindly informed me) that had made my wife's list longer than mine in the first place. Apparently, bassets are at the next to bottom rung of the canine intelligence ladder, only a slight step ahead of Afghans. My only recourse was Dog Obedience School at the local Humane Society. There, the Bassett family first encountered Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) at its zenith, in the form of Penny, our intrepid dog trainer.

Training embodied eight sessions, one per week, stretched over a two-month period — the theory being that what we learned during one class we could and should practice over the following week. The first two weeks were scheduled *without* dogs: *i.e.*, the initial training was really for us owners more than for our dogs. Epiphany #1: Why hadn't someone "required" us to do this sort of stuff *before* we had our first *child*, never mind our first dog. In any case, Penny began by sizing us up: We were definitely the suburban soccer Mom set, barely able to keep all our own and our kids' appointments straight much less parent with some degree of consciousness and purpose. There was also, we all very quickly learned, a sheepish common ground we shared: miserable failures to date with teaching our past dogs or our current puppies anything remotely resembling good manners.

Halfway into our first session *sans* dogs, it was clear that we and our puppies would be a particularly interesting challenge for Penny, as each of us described our pups: There was Torch the dalmatian, Cosmo the black lab, Bailey the mutt, Mollie the collie, Pork Chop the miniature collie, Teddy the golden retriever, and, of course, Scarlett our basset, comprising the class. Unbeknownst to any of us, Penny was seeking from our descriptions to identify the most recalcitrant and obstreperous "child" in the group to invite to come solo in week two, so that all the owners could see, before they brought their dogs, how to handle even a tough case. I can't say that we were particularly pleased that Penny chose Scarlett as the guinea pig, knowing that bassets as a breed do not take to training with relish. "Great," my wife intoned, "Now we have to be humiliated in front of all classmates when no one else's dog will be there to misbehave and take attention off of us."

Everything Penny told us in week one worked, especially establishing consequences for unacceptable behaviors: "out of nowhere" dropping a can partially filled with pennies to eliminate begging at the table or nipping at one's heels (the noise scares the pup into thinking the universe doesn't approve of such behaviors); letting the pup know who's the "alpha dog" (*i.e.*, you are the boss by "correcting" the dog via a choke chain if the dog rushes past you to go out the door first); placing mousetraps on furniture that the dog should not get up on (again, the noise scares them away); etc. I mean, *every* tactic worked for *every* bad behavior according to what Penny called, "the law of natural consequences": *i.e.*, unacceptable behavior had unpleasant consequences. An important corollary to the law of natural consequences: "Do not command that which you cannot enforce," since that teaches the pup insubordination can go unpunished. Slowly it dawned on us that we could correct certain things (jumping up on guests) and not others (barking at rabbits in the back yard). Epiphany #2: Already I'm thinking, there must be parallel strategies I should have been using with my kids before they institutionalized their obnoxious habits and before they got to the stage of insisting on negotiating all behaviors to which I objected.

Scarlett's debut at dog obedience class, week two, was classic: She dragged us into the place and immediately peed on the floor, in front of the expectant crowd, sensing, I suppose, the excitement and high anticipation already in the room. Penny ignored Scarlett at first (since one thing that pups must learn is that they are not the center of the universe) and

launched into the second week's instruction. About 30 minutes into the session, Penny introduced herself to Scarlett and took her leash, walking her to center stage. Penny sat down next to Scarlett, held her leash, and said, *once*, a command we had never yet used with her: "Down," pointing her hand down. That was it: one command, one gesture. Scarlett looked at Penny, saying with her tilted head expression, "Yeah, right." The rest of us did the same. All Penny told us was that we were about to witness a contest of wills, and that she, Penny, would win. Once she won this first battle, the war would be over for good. "Yeah, right," I thought.

For the next 30 minutes, Penny did not move, but just sat on the floor, held Scarlett's leash tightly so Scarlett could not wander away: Penny lectured to us on assorted nuances and protocols that were important in the universe of dogs: how to use positive reinforcements (mostly praise, occasionally treats), etc. Epiphany #3: it's the praise, not the treats, which creatures respond to most. Save the treats for exceptional deeds: e.g., when the pup comes when you whistle (i.e., the whistle is one of your Maginot Lines of Defense, to be used in critical situations, so that the dog, even in hot pursuit of a rabbit, stops and returns to you: in that case, when the pup surprises you in responsiveness beyond all expectations, give the "jackpot" of all rewards, liver treats). So now, thirty minutes after the command, "Down," Scarlett is visibly tiring: she is yawning, her legs are trembling, she occasionally whines, but she does *not* cave in. What is now patently obvious is that Scarlett knows *exactly* what the trainer wants, what *down* means, but there is no way she is going to willingly concede the point, since apparently she knows, too, that this is not just *a test* but *the test* of "who's in charge," and once vanquished, the pecking order is set forever, an indelible biological imprint that someone else is *the boss* to whom you must defer. As Penny would say, at some point, every pup is going to test the master, by saying, in puppy language, "*Why* do I have to obey the rules?" Epiphany #4: At what point in rearing our children did we miss the opportunity to make this point. How did it slip by, when it is obviously so important?

Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang. Eight o'clock, time for class to end, and Scarlett had not budged. I have to admit I took some sheepish pride in the strength of her resistance, since by now, it was obvious that she was in considerable physical discomfit, a condition that lying down would immediately relieve, but the strength of her own will was enormous. (Also, it was somewhat reassuring that there are "special cases" like bassets in which even the professionals cannot always triumph, excusing our poor results, to date, so far as I was concerned.) Everyone in the class, including us, began assembling our coats to exit the class when Penny said to everyone else, "See you next week," and to us, "Not so fast."

"Not so fast?," we asked.

"You're not going anywhere until Scarlett lies down." Epiphany #5: There it was, then, the main lesson in parenting we needed: once the gauntlet is thrown, you don't back off, compromise, wait for another "teaching opportunity" on another day, concede the point, re-consider the importance, recalculate the level of resistance or any other wobbly parenting excuse to get on to other pressing business, since there is no more pressing business than setting the boundaries and no more important time and way to do so than in the earliest challenge to them. The parents of Torch, Cosmo, Bailey, Mollie, Pork Chop, and Teddy all filed out, making a few desultory comments to us ("Hope you're not here *too* long") and a few encouraging ones to Scarlett ("It's OK to lie down, little girl"). Scarlett wagged her tail, and we put ours between our legs.

At 8:23 p.m., almost an hour after Penny had given the command, "Down," and 23 minutes after everyone else had left, Scarlett lay down. "Good dog," Penny murmured, petting her head. I leapt to my feet to give her a treat to "reinforce" Penny's approval, only to be rebuffed: "No!" Penny commanded, "You don't reward the dog for merely doing what she is supposed to do. Save the reward for something special."

"And so it goes," we learned in our subsequent P.E.T. classes with Penny and Scarlett and the rest of the troops. We were the last to arrive at Class Three, so all the other pups were there, chaotically out of control, sniffing each other's private parts, jumping up on and knocking over the small children in the room, yipping, and generally being obstreperous and undisciplined. Scarlett had made some modest progress over the week, but as soon as we arrived and she smelled all of the new friends she was about to make, she began lurching on her leash and giving all the signs that she was going to be difficult. Until we entered the room and saw Penny: Then she saluted, or at least the dog equivalent of a salute: she sat and looked at Penny, waiting for instructions. We all dropped our leashes in disbelief. "After the rest of you left last week," Penny explained, "I won."

As the weeks rolled by, I became a student of Penny's methods, and learned that Penny made no distinction, really,

between puppies and parents: all were the same in terms of their helplessness, their need to learn the routines, and their responsiveness to negative and positive reinforcements. When Mollie the collie's mom made a pitifully weak correction for misbehavior, Penny yelled a sharp "No!" which scared Mollie, Mollie's Mom, and the rest of us (I knew I wasn't going to mess with Penny after that): Penny had demonstrated to all of us one of her principles, that "one stern correction is worth a thousand pansy ones." Within minutes, Mollie misbehaved again and this time was decisively corrected by her Mom, to which Penny cooed, "Good correction, that's the way to do it, nice job." Mollie's Mom beamed. (I guess she felt Penny's approbation was the human equivalent of the liver treat.)

Week eight was final exams, graduation and doggy diplomas, an important affair in the lives of all of the students and their parents. We saw a lot of well-groomed pups, and more important, well-behaved ones. By week three we had learned that there would be a final exam, and ribbons would be awarded to the top three performers. The information galvanized my wife, competitive as she is, into high gear. We knew we had a challenge because even Penny conceded that bassets as a breed were "slow to respond" to training, so we worked assiduously at the task. Even when I arrived home late at night, my wife greeted me with the leash and the admonishment, "Scarlett's stay is suspect: Let's work on it." The final results: Scarlett took second place, a red ribbon (which is now framed and prominently displayed in our kitchen), and Penny conceded that had her "controlled walk" been more conventional and less basset-like (i.e., nose to the ground and wiggling into every corner), she would have taken first place. We were thrilled.

Epiphany #6: Everything I needed to know about parenting I learned (too late) at dog obedience school: effective parenting requires *self*-discipline on the part of the parent, consistency, time, practice, seriousness, and toughness. *And* it requires some modeling to see and emulate. Footnote to schools: Maybe we should require all newcomers to schools to provide, like immunization records, a P.E.T. certificate. Then, we might be less likely to have, as does one independent school, three second-grade mothers "on probation." Coda: Thanks to Penny and P.E.T., we have a very well-behaved basset pup, and I no longer "owe my wife big time," at least not on this front.

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