

DOGGY DO DOS

BY

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It's a dog's life, which isn't so bad if you happen to be my dog. Grunt, you see, has a traumatic afternoon when he has to watch me pound out words on my computer. Without a tug of war every few hours, life as he knows it has ended. Sometimes I wish he would get a life.

Grunt does have a life though, and that's it. His peculiarities are partly due to his personality and breeding, but all dogs have quirks and annoying habits for which they are not responsible. *You* are the responsible party. How you treat your dog from the day he comes home with you as a puppy has a tremendous effect on both your lives.

Raising a puppy to a decent pet is more than just walking, feeding, and grooming it for the next decade. The dog will shape your lifestyle to a great extent. So, assess your life now, and how you hope it to be in ten years. Then decide whether that cute puppy will fit into it. A dog is not a goldfish that you can ignore except for feeding. How that puppy grows is your responsibility: you are a parent of sorts.

Grunt, whose registered and more regal name is *Teak's Ng Cheung Chow*, is my almost-two-year-old Chow Chow. Anyone with a passing knowledge of Chows understands they are fiercely loyal, one-person dogs who do not take separation from their master very well.

He is an apartment dog who kept himself company when I worked in an office. I felt guilty about leaving Grunt at home all the time and would see him at lunch. Then, on those evenings when I had to return to the office or wanted to see friends, he tagged along. Grunt came to expect that outside office hours, he would be with me continually.

Needless to say, he is not only well socialized, he's also unusually attached to me. I was single and without a girlfriend then: it was him and me. When I began spending every day at home writing, it only got worse.

Poor Grunt is affronted that I have a life beyond him, and perhaps he has a point. He has, after all, been the center of attention since he arrived, and it's unusual to him to be less than the focal point of my life. I even understand why he would give me a nip at an appropriately frustrating moment. A tragic mistake on his part, but I digress.

I have a new girlfriend who is not particularly fond of Grunt. Being drooled over and jumped on (by him) holds no appeal to her, so she tries to avoid him. After being ignored long enough, Grunt will drag her coat and shoes to her. If that doesn't get rid of her, he'll wriggle between us or whimper the entire evening.

The point is that Grunt is accustomed to patterns in his life; patterns I created. A dog, be it a mangy street mutt or the best pedigreed lap dog, can not reason. It is conditioned to expect things to happen consistently. I have made Grunt understand that he is the center of my life and disruptions only serve to confuse him.

Grunt and I will have to replace old patterns with new ones as our lives evolve. Those of you who are only thinking about getting a dog, or have just brought your puppy home, have much to consider. Just because you answered the important questions about having a dog: the long term costs in time and money, the restrictions on housing and mobility, etc., hardly means you can stop thinking about how this puppy is going to affect your life.

If you want to have a sixty pound, whimpering Gund bear with a bad attitude for twelve years, try my approach. If, however, you would rather have a dog that understands it is only an enhancement to your life, you need to plan how to deal with this animal.

Most dogs larger than a breadbox can stay inside or outside. If we lived where Grunt could stay outside most of the day, he would enjoy and appreciate it. We don't, so he is a house baby. You can choose for your puppy, but do it soon and stick with it. Banishing your dog to the back yard because you've tired of wiping wet paws and smelling dog in the chesterfield is neither nice nor fair. How would you feel if your parents had done that when you became a gangly pubescent?

Feeding is another trick. First problem: do you feed your dog at mealtime then take the plate away, or fill the bowl in the morning and leave it there? Both are common and have their disciples. Again, select one method and stick with it. You can switch your dog from the all day bowl to once a day meals, but never in reverse.

I favour leaving a full bowl on the floor in the morning and letting Grunt nibble as he wishes. My family has done this with all our dogs, and they have lived long, healthy lives. Besides, Grunt appears to prefer it.

The second food problem is more troublesome. Do you feed your puppy scraps and give him what you're eating? There are many approaches to this dilemma, at least three of which I have mishandled with Grunt, ensuring that he will forever expect to share my meals, usually at the table.

Generally speaking, it's not a good idea to get your dog into the habit of being fed away from his food bowl. When he gets the picture that he's entitled to what you eat, when you eat it, he'll always expect it. The difference between a romantic candlelight dinner and bar-b-qued burgers on the patio is lost on your dog. He thinks, "You're eating and I get some, period." This leads to begging, whining, and unwanted paws on your knees.

Many, if not all vets will tell you that your food is not healthy for your dog. True, but then again, it's probably not so good for you either. Grunt always gets some of what I eat (provided there are no little bones). In moderation, his stomach doesn't get upset, he's happy, and I enjoy a quiet meal.

Another thing for you – *parentus caninus* – to consider is how you want your dog to act with strangers. Project ten years into the future: do you really want your dog taking her favorite toy to your guests when you've become a corporate vice president? Should she bound up to and jump on your best friend's wimpy, snivelling kids? I find it funny how Grunt offers people their clothes when he's had enough of them, but my career aspirations are probably different than yours.

If your dog is not to jump on people, then that must be the law from the outset. Transgressions can not be tolerated, even with you. If you let him jump on you, be prepared to be jumped on always. Remember, Armani and Salvation Army are the same to your dog.

I shouldn't even discuss grooming as I am a dreadful (and dreaded) groomer. Grunt normally sees a professional for his coiffing, leaving me out of the loop. There is a lot of hair and I tend to be a little rough, which causes problems. Nevertheless, I do attempt to brush him when he starts shedding.

Never, ever, let your dog decide if and when he is to be groomed. By the same token, turn grooming into a hellish nightmare for your dog and neither of you will enjoy the experience. Five hundred or more weekly hell-sessions over ten years will wear on both your tolerance levels.

You have undoubtedly completed all the dog magazine mini-quizzes, and are prepared to groom your dog for life. Good luck! Unless you've had a dog to understand the real nature of grooming, or decided on a bald breed, you're in for a big surprise. Dogs can develop baseball sized mats while begging food at the table.

March on! You've started, so try and make it enjoyable for both of you. Try it in a special, comfortable place so that your friend knows this is for his benefit and that pulled hair is not cause for ripping off your arm. Be gentle. Be patient. Be lubricated with good malt scotch. I've found this lessens the trauma of grooming considerably. Sedation should be a last resort simply because it's difficult to hold the brush. One way or another, you both must struggle through.

Grunt could care less that I choose to abuse my body with booze. In fact, I think he revels in his pain-giver role, being exceptionally insistent about early walks. He has recently, however, developed a healthy respect for silence on those mornings when I smell like a still in a forest fire.

Your dog is not going to care about your over-indulgences either. All your dog cares about is that while you were out apparently enjoying yourself and missing the appointed walking hour, his bladder was filling and he has to go out NOW. (This is especially applicable to apartment dwellers who *must* take their dogs for walks.) Take my advice, go out. Ten minutes of fresh air is easier on your system than "accident" induced nausea.

The same goes for the next morning when you wonder if your friend and companion shed on your tongue while you slept. He wants to go out because he always goes out at 8:00 A.M. Don't tell him your troubles, he's got problems of his own. So again, take a deep breath, put on the darkest sunglasses you have, and get out there so he can widdle. You'll both feel better for it.

That's it. There is absolutely nothing worse about having a dog, and counterbalancing these problems are the unconditional friendship and love of a four-legged pal. As long as you realize you are from the outset creating habits which will its lifetime, you and your dog will live more enjoyable lives together. Best of luck.

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