



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Nothing in Life Is Free

A Training Technique for Dogs

D OES YOUR DOG GET ON THE FURNITURE and refuse to get off? Nudge your hand and insist on being petted or played with? Refuse to come when called? Defend his food bowl or toys from you?

If so, a training technique called “nothing in life is free” may be just the solution you’re looking for. “Nothing in life is free” is not a magic pill that will solve a specific behavior problem. Instead, it’s a way of living with your dog that will help him behave better because he trusts and accepts you as his leader and is confident knowing his place in the family.

How to Practice “Nothing in Life Is Free”

- Use positive reinforcement methods to teach your dog a few commands and tricks. “Sit,” “Down,” and “Stay” are useful commands. “Shake,” “Speak,” and “Roll over” are fun tricks to teach your dog.
- Once your dog has mastered a few commands, you can begin to practice “nothing in life is free.” Before you give your dog anything (food, a treat, a walk, a pat on the head), he must first perform one of the commands he has learned. See the chart below for examples.

- Once you’ve given the command, don’t give your dog what he wants until he does what you want. If he refuses to perform the command, walk away, come back a few minutes later, and start again. If your dog refuses to obey the command, be patient and remember that eventually he will have to obey your command to get what he wants.

Make sure your dog knows the command well and understands what you want before you begin practicing “nothing in life is free.”

The Benefits of This Technique

- Most dogs assume a neutral or submissive role toward people, but some dogs will challenge their owners for dominance. Requiring a dominant dog to work for everything he wants is a safe, nonconfrontational way to establish control.

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YOU	YOUR DOG
Put your dog’s leash on to go for a walk	Must sit until you’ve put the leash on
Feed your dog	Must lie down and stay until you’ve put the bowl down
Play a game of fetch after work	Must sit and “shake hands” each time you throw the toy
Rub your dog’s belly while watching TV	Must lie down and roll over before being petted

- Dogs who may never display aggressive behavior such as growling, snarling, or snapping may still manage to manipulate you. These dogs may display affectionate behavior that borders on being “pushy,” such as nudging your hand to be petted or “worming” their way onto the furniture to be close to you. This technique gently reminds the dog that he must abide by your rules.
- Fearful dogs may become more confident by obeying commands. Having a strong leader and knowing his place in the hierarchy helps to make the submissive dog feel more secure.

Why This Technique Works

Animals who live in groups, like dogs, establish a social structure within the group called a dominance hierarchy. This dominance hierarchy serves to maintain order, reduce conflict, and promote cooperation among pack members. To ensure that your home is a safe and happy place for pets and people, the humans in the household should assume the highest positions in the dominance hierarchy. Practicing “nothing in life is free” gently and effectively communicates to your dog that his position in the hierarchy is subordinate to yours.

From your dog’s point of view, children also have a place in this hierarchy. Because children are small and can get down on the dog’s level to play, dogs often consider them to be playmates rather than superiors. With the supervision of an adult, it’s a good idea to encourage children in the household to also practice “nothing in life is free” with the family dog.

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