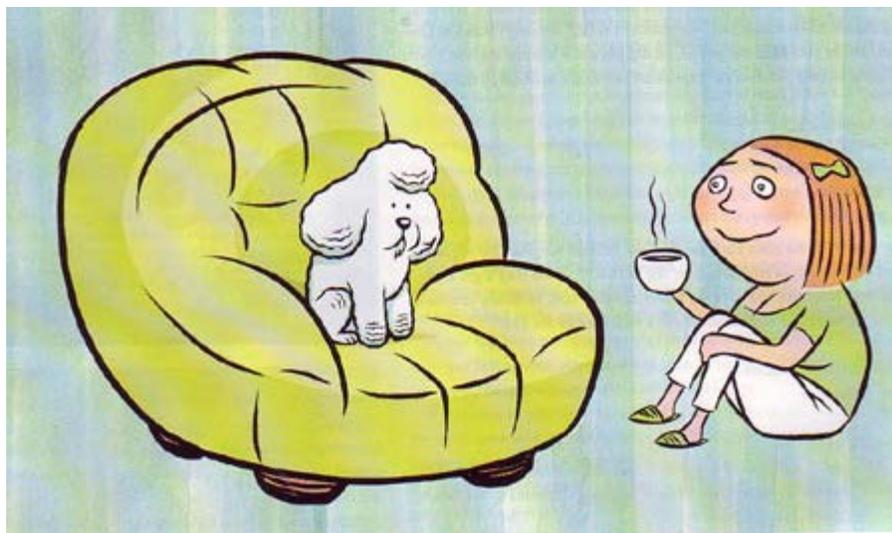


## Dogs without borders

by Gillian Ridgeway

This article was originally published in the August 2007 edition of [Dogs In Canada](#).

Dogs on the couch, dogs on the bed, dogs grumbling when asked to get off the chair. Does it really matter?



In the grand scheme of things, our dogs sitting on our furniture doesn't affect anyone but us. If we don't mind, who's to say what's right and what's wrong? In fact, it makes us happy to think that our dogs are happy. It's all innocent, right?

In fact, dogs that haven't been taught boundaries or are allowed to make their own decisions can affect those around us. Although it may sound over the top, the consequences of allowing our dogs to follow the beat of their own drum can be re-homing or even euthanasia for the dog. This is a hard thing to hear, but if your dog starts to growl at your kids or the neighbor's kids, the prospect of sending your dog to live elsewhere becomes real. Many people in this situation wish they had known to set some rules from the very beginning.

### What's mine is mine

We need to look at how things can escalate. In most of the cases I see, dogs that growl or even bite do so mainly when a perceived possession is part of the scenario. Most of the family pets I've seen growling are doing so from a physically high position - dogs on the furniture often seem to take over that space and may growl and even snap if asked to get off. This can turn into an escalating scene with the owner getting angry, the dog becoming more unnerved by this response and a tussle ensuing before the dog is finally tackled off the furniture.

At the other end of the scale, the dog is left alone - often seen as the most peaceful solution. Some of us have seen this situation in our own families. We go to visit our aunt and 'Buffy' is sleeping on "her chair." We're instructed not to disturb her and find ourselves sitting cross-legged on the floor sipping tea. If we dare ask Buffy to get off the chair, we're met with a menacing glance and low growl and are sharply told by our aunt that it's our fault for disturbing her. If you decide to trade seats and let Buffy have a turn on the floor, you may have a struggle on your hands or even a bite. She has decided that this spot is hers.

This doesn't mean that dog need to stay off the furniture; it means they need to know you have rules about when they can and can't get up on it. A dog with no boundaries, that can pick and choose where to sleep, can become a problem for the family. The consequences of a bite run deep.

It's not just being on the furniture that can pose a problem; it's often a general problem of possession. We can see it manifested over favorite toys or food. Some dogs get upset when partners show affection. If your dog starts to become possessive, be sure to teach her that everything is yours, and she needs to do something such as a sit or down before she gets a treat. General rules and guidelines for your dog will help the situation. (Your trainer can help with more information.)

Dogs without rules may take it upon themselves to become assertive in other situations. It's fine for your dog to get up onto the bed

for a cuddle, or to watch *Grey's Anatomy* with you on the couch. The problem is when she won't get off the furniture when asked. Dogs must respect our rules, and one rule might be that after the show ends, your dog must go to her own bed. Many dogs are fine with that, but there are some that given an inch will take a mile. That type of personality needs our guidance.

## R-E-S-P-E-C-T

If you recognize that you have a problem with your dog respecting the house rules, start by teaching her to get off the furniture when asked. Something as simple as that will help her understand she doesn't own the furniture; you still have full control of the situation.

To help your dog understand what you want, have her wear a house lead when you're home, the most effective and safest way to teach her to get off the furniture. Get an inexpensive nylon lead and cut the handle off. The lead can be quite thin, almost like string.

Start by inviting your dog to join you on the couch. If she gets up without an invitation, nicely guide her back to the floor using the leash. This isn't a correction as your dog doesn't know the rules. You may think that you can do the same thing by taking the collar, but the leash is more effective as you can use it to direct from a distance. It's also safer in the event your dog snaps at you.

I prefer not to use any command words. Lots of dogs become programmed to get up, then are told "Off" and get down. This is repeated frequently and the owner feels successful because the dog did as she was told. But the dog shouldn't get up in the first place unless invited. If you silently guide with the leash, your dog will more likely resign to staying off.

*A dog with no boundaries, that can pick and choose where to sleep, can become a problem for the family. The consequences of a bite run deep.*

The key is to be persistent and not allow your emotions to become involved. Every time your dog gets onto the furniture, guide her down. There's no need to get annoyed. She has a history of being allowed up. Your persistence will make this exercise successful and the benefits are worth the effort.

Be sure to catch her doing the right thing. If she's sitting in front of you but not trying to get up, give her some attention and indicate that what she's doing is perfect. Several times during the course of an evening, invite her up for a cuddle. Keep her with you for varying lengths of time, then ask her to get down...simply for the practice.

Dogs that have boundaries and rules and don't take things for granted are less likely to show possession issues in other areas of life. They will have some rules to follow and will look forward to your cuddling time together. The bonus is that when you have guests over, no one will end up sitting on the floor. Instead, your dog will be more than happy to relinquish his seat.

---

*The director of *Who's Walking Who* (Toronto and Ajax), and co-author of the book *Citizen Canine*, Gillian Ridgeway has been working with family dogs for over 34 years. She can be reached at [www.whowalkingwho.net](http://www.whowalkingwho.net)*