

Helping your dog handle challenges of summer

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William Hageman / Chicago Tribune



journal fileSummertime brings some of its own issues for dogs, who typically spend more time outdoors with kids, wildlife, and yards that are tempting to dig up.

Prepare pets for more encounters with children, wildlife, lightning

Warm weather brings a fresh set of challenges for dog owners. More exposure to children and neighborhood critters, and stress caused by summer storms and fireworks, are just a few issues dogs have to face.

Dog trainer Victoria Stilwell (TV's "It's Me or the Dog" and "Greatest American Dog") has written "Train Your Dog Positively" (Ten Speed Press), which stresses the importance of positive reinforcement. She chatted recently about those summertime problems. This is an edited version of the conversation.

Q: Summer means more kids are outside, increasing the chances of unpleasant encounters. How do dog owners prepare for that?

A: The earlier you socialize a dog with children, the better. But you also have to realize that kids, especially young ones, are kids. Sometimes you have to, as a responsible adult, be responsible for a dog's interaction.

Manage the environment. Have a solid fence around the house, don't let (your dog) run loose. Keep them on (leashes) around kids.

Children find it difficult to manage their impulses. By managing your dog, you make it easier for the dog to deal with children. It's also about children understanding dog language, how to interact, how to be safe. When you give lessons to a child, the dog is automatically calmed. Teach children to be canine-smart.

Q: What about wildlife?

A: Some dogs have a really high prey drive, and some just love chasing things. Prey drive is hard to deal with because you're going against instinct. All dogs, regardless of breed, love to hunt. We've domesticated (dogs), so that while they may hunt, they're not good at killing. We've bred that out of them mostly. So I think when it's safe and appropriate, you have to let them chase. When it's not, you have to stop it.

I take a stick with a long rope tied to it, then I tie a big furry rabbit-looking thing to the rope. And I whirl that around on the ground, and my dogs chase it, and they love it. I've taught them to wait before they chase, wait in one spot and stay absolutely still till I tell them OK. We play this game a lot. They have to wait for my cue before they can chase. It's great to use outside in a park or on a hike, in situations where I don't want them to hunt.

Q: When warm weather comes, people love to start digging in the yard. It's called gardening. But it's not so good when dogs do it.

A: What we don't realize is there might be something nice to eat down there. Dogs' hearing is so sensitive, especially to high pitches. That's important to finding prey in the earth. So when my Lab cocks her head, she's listening to what's in the ground, the squeaks of that little animal beneath her. So she wants to dig.

I create an area in my yard where they can dig. Have a sand pit or a dirt pit. Hide dog toys in there, two or three, and let them dig. They get all their desire to dig out of their system and then they leave the rest of my yard alone. You let them do what they're designed to do, but in a way that's appropriate.

Q: In the book, you write that thunderstorm phobia is common. I have yet to find a solution that works. Any ideas?

A: Last year I came out with a Canine Noise Phobia Series CD set (positively.com). There are many CDs out there that have sound effects of noises dogs don't like: fireworks, thunderstorms, gunshots. Mine are unique because underneath the graduating sound effect is music that is specially designed to calm dogs.

Many people leave the TV or radio on for their dogs when they go out. Trouble is, too much talk is auditory overload. Too much classical music with big orchestras is auditory overload. Also, it is believed dogs can feel the static electricity and shocks from the air before the storm. Rubber flooring and denlike spaces are two things you can provide. Play calming music. I close the blinds so they can't see flashes of light. So gradually you change a dog from actively fearing a noise to passively hearing it.

Suggested Reading:

- [Keep Rover cool in heat of summer](#)
- [Busy cat is fine in cold](#)
- [Santa Fe Can't Handle Success](#)
- [Bulldogs for Soldiers program helping veterans](#)
- [Eagles Handle Vikings](#)

