



Excerpts from a New Dog Lover's Diary

Jan Dworkin with Caroline Spark



Mattie, a Pembroke Welsh Corgi, came to live with Jan, a first time dog owner when Mattie was just under a year old. She had been surrendered to a rescue group because her previous owners found her too much of a handful. She was crate trained, partially house trained, and otherwise had little training. She was smart, energetic, friendly with people and dogs. She showed promise as a companion and potential therapy dog for Jan, a psychologist with an active lifestyle. Jan kept a journal of her first few months living with Mattie, recording some of the highs and lows of getting to know a dog for the first time.

Jan offers extracts from her journal that describe some of the things she found helpful in those early months, and Caroline highlights tips that other new dog owners might also find useful.

October 5th, 2009: Breaking through fear

I have never had a pet before, not a cat, not a dog, not a gerbil, not a mouse, nothing! And I've been scared of dogs because of being bitten as a child. I was traumatized by that. Dogs were things to be feared, not played with. Now Mattie has come into my life and I am learning how to relate to this totally foreign creature. My first instinct is to be afraid of her. I am learning so much from watching an experienced trainer interact with her, I feel like I am watching a magician. Thirty seconds after they met at the foster home, Mattie was sitting for her – this crazy wild puppy suddenly obeying her, a stranger she doesn't even know. But now I am getting the hang of how to do it myself! It's not so hard now I know

how to get Mattie to want to do the things I want her to do. It's all about rewards, and being clear, and making it enjoyable. Teaching her feels like fun for both of us, and I am looking forward to more!

Choosing a first dog

Sometimes a dog just comes to you, lands on your doorstep, literally or metaphorically. You fall in love – and deal with whatever problems might come along. But if you do have a choice, it's a good idea to do some research beforehand, as Jan did.

Some dogs were bred to stay close, others to run hard for miles each day, and work independently. Some dogs are naturally shy or quiet, others are bold, excitable, or bark a lot. Draw up a list of what's important to you in a dog, and stick to it! Don't get swayed by the first dog you see, or by sad eyes or a tragic story. Think about your lifestyle, personality, wants and needs in a canine companion. If you are attracted to particular breeds or breed mixes, find out more about them and the kind of life they typically need to be healthy and happy. (Jan did some Internet research, talked to breeders, people from Corgi rescue groups, and other Corgi enthusiasts before she got Mattie).

If you're new to living with a dog, make things easier on yourself. Choose a dog with sound health, a friendly, easy going temperament, and breed characteristics that fit with your lifestyle. If you're unsure, seek professional help so that life with your new dog starts off on the right paw.



October 8, 2009: Learning a new language

A big challenge – Mattie's barking! I can't tell the difference between the kinds of barking she does. They all sound the same to me. Often we are alone, just the two of us in this little holiday cottage. She doesn't know me, she is the only animal in the house, and it is all new to us both. Maybe she is protecting her space too. Everything seems to be a reason to bark! And it all sounds aggressive to me. It freaks me out. I have no idea what Mattie wants or what to do about it. I am trying to live my life as I lived it before Mattie – eat, focus on my work, talk on the phone, hug my boyfriend when he comes over. It's not working. And it seems like whatever I do, she barks!

I am learning how to adjust to life with Mattie, and how to figure out what all this barking means – it's a major thing for me, I haven't a clue! I am learning that some of it is demanding -- when Mattie is bored or wants attention, she barks. Other times she is barking about sounds outside – new sounds, the sound of the ocean, birds, other dogs barking, cats, and I don't know what else. I can't hear anything sometimes, but she does. But I can hear that her bark sounds different to the demanding one.

I am learning to respond in different ways depending on what she is barking about. With demanding barking, I have to wait and reward moments of quiet, not the barking. I am also

learning more about Mattie's needs – for company, and down-time, and exercise -- lots of exercise, for her mind as well as for her body!

What is my dog saying?

Dogs bark to communicate many things, including: to get something they want (e.g. a meal or treats, social contact, play, the chance to eliminate); to alert to the presence of potential intruders, as a warning or threat; and to express anxiety, insecurity, excitement, happiness, or frustration. Dogs also bark because they are bored, and because it makes them feel better. Repetitive barking can become compulsive, due to chemical changes in the dog's brain, a so-called "barker's high."

Listen carefully to your dog barking, and notice what happens just before and afterwards. Solving barking problems depends on identifying their underlying causes. Recent research suggests that people understand barking better than we think we do – but if your dog's barking has you baffled or is driving you nuts, seek help!



October 11, 2009: Up and down time

We had a trip to the dog store today, and a world of dog toys opened up to me! Mattie seems happier now she has a variety of toys to play with, Kongs to chew on. We are doing a little training every day, in the house and outside. She doesn't bark as much.

I am also learning that it's OK to give Mattie down-time in her crate – that she actually needs this because she gets too stimulated, like a kid who's overexcited and can't calm down. Blocking off sights or sounds with a sheet over her crate or playing the radio helps when she is napping and sudden movements or new sounds get her barking again. And I understand now that she is just being a dog responding to things in her environment – she's not being aggressive at all!

I am beginning to understand that if I need a break, it is likely that Mattie needs one as well. My needs are as important as hers. I don't have to stretch beyond my own limits to take care of my dog. We can work it out!

October 15, 2009: A breakthrough

Today, back in the city, I had an amazing experience. My apartment is new for Mattie but it doesn't have so many strange sounds as when we were at the beach, so she doesn't bark as much. But she still barks sometimes, she seems restless and unable to settle. I went to her crate *before* she started to get really barky and I talked to her and stroked her. I was able to soothe her and calm her down! This was my first experience of having an impact on my dog – or any dog, or any animal. And it was profound for me. I realized that I *can* give my dog what she needs, that it is me who is here to provide for her, and that I can figure out what she is saying!



October 20th, 2009: Making connection

Mattie barked and barked in her crate two nights ago. Just when I thought things were getting better. It went on half the night. The neighbors complained and I just couldn't have her barking like that. Nothing seemed to work and in the end, I crawled into her crate with her and just soothed her – I knew that wasn't the right thing to do, but I didn't know what else to do. Now I look back, I see it was the beginning of us building our relationship. We are both so new to life with each other, and making this connection with each other helped to calm us both down. We have been doing much better in the last couple of days. I am less anxious and so is Mattie, and she isn't barking much at all.

One of the things that is awesome about working with a good trainer is that you have a supportive person to help you, someone who is open about things that don't work – so you never feel you aren't good enough. If something doesn't work out, we keep trying different things until we find something that does.

November 4th, 2009: Peeing in the house

Put together a new dog owner, a new apartment, and a dog who, as it turns out, is only partially housetrained, and you have a recipe for disaster! I've been feeling so nervous about so many things, especially housetraining, and I think my nervousness about this has been as hard on Mattie. Her peeing in the house has been difficult for me. I've really had a thing about it. It has really, really, *really* bothered me!

I have come to understand that certain places and times in the day make Mattie more likely to have accidents, and that we have to re-train Mattie in her new home. I can think ahead and prevent accidents by making simple changes in the environment, so we can both be successful. Mattie has been peeing on my living room rug. I really don't want to take it up, but it seems like that's the easiest thing to do, while I work on housetraining routine and teach Mattie to use the outdoor doggy toilet box I just bought. Mattie can't have an accident on the rug because there is no more rug. I can relax a bit – and that helps Mattie too (if I am tense she seems more likely to pee).

Housetraining

Mattie's problems were connected to anxiety and insufficient training – she hadn't really learned where it was and wasn't OK to go, so she did what was easy and comfortable for her. These are common reasons for inappropriate elimination. Others include physical health problems, marking territory (often when there have been changes in the house, such as a new baby or housemate), and negative experiences connected with housetraining in the past. Small breeds can be more difficult to train than larger ones, and puppies who are forced to eliminate where they sleep are often particularly difficult to housetrain. Some dogs are fine in their own homes, but eliminate in other people's houses. Don't put up with messes. Seek help as soon as you can!



November 18th, 2009:

It's been about 2 weeks now since I put my rug back, and Mattie hasn't peed on it since. And after some hesitation, she is using her outdoor box – it's great not to have to go down 7 floors in an elevator to get outside!

December 15th, 2009: Spooks in the city

Mattie is sometimes fearful around new things. When she first came to live with me she was afraid of the kitchen, and of going inside a garage, she spooked at the sound of a cardboard box being picked up, a balloon, and miscellaneous other sights and sounds. When she is afraid she freezes and won't budge. Sometimes when she stops dead on leash it helps just to keep on walking, making like it is no big deal – and she'll just kick back into gear. But mostly patience is key when she is afraid of something. I have learned not to force her, but allow her to investigate and approach at her own speed. She's mostly fine now, but odd things outside still spook her, like a grate on the street or the mail area for our condo building. I learned how to use treats as a way of getting Mattie comfortable around spooky things and it always works. Like yesterday I gave her a treat each time she took a step towards the mail area. After a little while she was even able to go inside – so she got extra treats for that! And today she was fine when we went to get the mail. I love her courage! She is overcoming her fears one by one and I am proud of her.

Working Through Fears

Puppies and young dogs go through phases when they are more afraid. Some dogs have shy or fearful temperaments. Others have had bad experiences, or haven't had enough exposure to life. If your dog shows signs of fear or balks at interacting with the world, you can help. It is important neither to force the issue, nor coddle your dog. Find calm, confident, reassuring, ways of showing your dog that she or he has nothing to fear. Learn to read your dog's body language when it shows signs of fear. Take the pressure off, give space and time to make a courageous choice and reward that choice with something your dog can enjoy in that moment. Convey relaxation and confidence through your own voice and posture. Fear and anxiety can make life miserable for your dog, and be distressing and frustrating for you. Don't wait – if you aren't sure what to do, seek professional help.

December 20th, 2009: You don't have to be perfect

One of my fears from the beginning was that everything I did would be teaching Mattie something, and because of my inexperience, I would be teaching her the wrong things. I don't have that feeling so much anymore. My confidence is building every day. I know that I am teaching her good things. I do some things wrong, but she adjusts anyway. I don't have to get it all perfect.

In the beginning, when we were getting ready to go out, I thought I had to have everything ready - leash, poop bag, and everything. (I am a space case – I forget stuff and have to go back for things like my keys). But Mattie has learned to wait for me! Now she gets excited about going for a walk, but sits quietly waiting for me by the front door. And when we come in from a walk, it's the same thing. I used to stand on her leash while I took my jacket and boots off before taking off her harness and wiping her paws. I told myself it was like the airplane thing, you have to put your own mask on before you take care of the kids, but I felt bad about making her wait. Now I don't have to stand on her leash – she doesn't go anywhere, just sits and waits quite happily. I don't feel bad any more. I am learning there is no such thing as a perfect way of doing things with dogs, and that they can learn in spite of (and perhaps because of) what we might see as our own limitations.



December 3rd 2009: It's all about mutual adjustment

Mattie is a resilient, flexible being who is capable of learning about and adjusting to me, just as I am learning about and adjusting to her. At first, I had all sorts of questions about routine. I was worried I would have to be the kind of person who does the same thing every day. But I learned that Mattie's routine is my routine, my life has lots of variety in it and so does hers – and she's fine with this. I have made changes to suit Mattie – but I also don't have to become a different person and totally change my life style because of having a dog in my life. Working with a trainer helped me with my confidence, so now I know that who I am is OK -- and that that's true for my dog as well. We adjust to each other. It's a process, and it's working out great! Whatever makes life easier and happier for me AND my dog is the way to go – there's no judgment!

December 30th 2009: Becoming play partners

Last night was special for us. After watching Caroline play and interact with Mattie, I was able to play with her in a new way. Our tug game became more than just tug... it was like an interaction, a relationship that went on and on for about a half hour that we were both truly enjoying. At the end of it, she perched herself between my outstretched legs, facing me and got right up close to my face and just sat there contented, beaming at me, as if she were saying thank you. It was very moving and maybe the first time that I had really "been" with her in play... rather than "played with her" because that was what I was trying to learn how to do. This is probably obvious to most people but for me it was a revelation. I know that it's early days with Mattie and I can only imagine that it gets better from here.

December 31st, 2009: We've come a long way in a short time!

It's only been about 3 months since I first met Mattie, and 2 months since she came to live with me- I can't believe how much I have learned about how to take care of and communicate with my dog. Every day I feel more confident, relaxed, and happy as her guardian, knowing that my job is to take care of her and give her a good life. She goes to daycare some days, comes to work with me sometimes, visits friends with me, we go to the dog park often, and she has tons of dog friends (she's a super social dog).

Every day, the thought comes up, "Am I giving my dog a good life? Is she happy?" I see her running around with other dogs, or scampering along a trail in Forest Park, or snoozing in her spot on the couch (our compromise) and I think "Yes, she is happy!" It makes me have a tender, open-hearted feeling - what my friend Theo (aged 8) calls a "love cry." It makes me feel like a better person.

