**Guiding Eyes Graduate Quarterly Call, July 30, 2023 summary**

**Topic: House Manners, from Puppyhood to Guide Dog Training and Beyond**

Guiding Eyes Graduate Council President, Jywanza Maye welcomed everyone and turned it over to Becky Davidson, who served as the facilitator. She introduced the panelists: Michael Goehring–a Guiding Eyes Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (RGDMI), Brian Payne–a puppy raiser from the Massachusetts East Region, and Terri Nettles-a longtime GEB graduate. Becky thanked those who submitted questions to gebgradcouncil@gmail.com prior to the call.

Questions and answers are as follows:

Question: What strategies are used to prevent bad behavior, e.g., going through the garbage, counter surfing, jumping on tables, and/or chewing everything in sight?

Brian: This depends on the age of the dog. When the raiser gets a young puppy, the objective is to remove all temptations from the puppy’s reach, including keeping all garbage in a container with a lid, until the puppy is mature enough to understand what is expected. During training, the raiser begins to introduce the temptation. The puppy is allowed to briefly investigate. the raiser then asks the puppy to disengage by calling the puppy’s name and getting the puppy to refocus its attention on the raiser. A heavy amount of treats is used to celebrate when they disengage from the object/distraction and re-engage with the raiser. The raiser continues to build on this positive behavior over and over and over. Similar training procedures are utilized for counter surfing. A soft cloth leash is always kept on the puppy and used in the house. When meals are being prepared, the raiser can step on the leash and only give the puppy an inch or two of slack. If they try to jump up, they self-correct because they get yanked back down to the floor. Always ignore the unwanted behavior. When the puppy is sitting nicely next to us and not trying to jump, we reward them with treats. The puppy quickly learns that good things happen when all four paws are on the floor. When a paw goes up, the puppy is ignored.

Mike G: The strategy is essentially the same as from the time the dog is with the puppy raiser through their training at GEB. The primary objective is continuity when handling. The basis of all behavior training in the home is “What do we want instead; what do we want this to look like?” If a dog behaves inappropriately in a graduate’s home, the first thing we want to do is to stop the behavior from occurring. Guiding Eyes dogs pattern extremely well. That patterning works very well when landmarking. However, patterning can also be a nuisance when dealing with house manners. You want to stop a pattern of inappropriate behavior before it has a chance to solidify. We want to remove the distraction so that engaging with it is not a possibility. Reflect on what we want good behavior to look like.

Terri: There are differences now in terms of using food reward. Keep the trash can locked when there is something that would be especially tempting. If the dog gets distracted, give the “touch” command to get the dog to refocus its attention on you. The dog immediately comes and is given a food reward.

Question: Do puppy raisers teach the dogs to stay out of the kitchen while food is being prepared?

Terri: My dogs tend to follow me into the kitchen. I’ve often wondered about this, because if you have, for example, boiling pasta, and you trip over the dog, something unfortunate could happen. Fortunately, I’ve never had any issues.

Brian: I teach my puppies to stay out of the kitchen. I have a set-up that allows the puppy to be at the edge of the kitchen, and I can still see them. Just as important, they can still see me. The puppies want to be near you. If you get up and leave a room, they want to follow you. Especially when a dog is under one year of age, it can be very disturbing to them if the dog can’t see you. If you have an enclosed kitchen, it can be stressful for the dog to be around the corner and not see you. It can be stressful for the raiser as well, since they then don’t know what the dog is doing. “Go place” is an important training command. We pick a spot in or near the kitchen, and we put a mat down. If we’re in the act of cooking, the dog goes into a “go place”. No matter what stage the dog is in—being raised or with a graduate—it is important for the dog to have a “go place” area/mat. When you say, “Go place” they should lie down in their spot, away from the hazards of the kitchen. They don’t necessarily need to be out of the kitchen, but they need to be out of the way.

Mike G: Whether we have a visual on the dogs or not, the dogs like to have a visual of us. The best time to establish a “go place” is when you bring the dog home from GEB or during home training. Establish that your dog has a place where it is not underfoot, but where they can see you. In the beginning, if they are fidgety, you can use a tie-down or a crate. Check in periodically with your dog and say, “place”. (You want to establish control from the beginning). Check in with your dog; give him a food reward if he displays good behavior. While the dog is in his place, Give him a bone or a favorite toy. Keeping the dog a safe distance away from you is counter-intuitive, so the toy can help keep him occupied. Sometimes, a dog will regress, because they have been through different stages of training and they’re adjusting. When the dogs spend months in a kennel, if the skills were marginal in the puppy raiser home, the dogs can regress. It is important that dogs are kept away from hazards in the kitchen. Remember, if you move with your older dog, you can still establish a new “go place”.

Question: How can we as handlers encourage our dogs to walk calmly in the house while off leash?

Mike G: The first thing to ask is, is my dog always moving too fast in the house? Is it an energy thing, meaning he hasn’t gotten out on route today and gotten enough mental and physical stimulation? The answer will depend on determining where the dog’s energy is coming from. If enough exercise has been provided and the dog just tends to be a fast mover, it may be an issue of spatial awareness. A dog may have had a puppy raiser home with a lot of square footage, and suddenly, the dog is living with a graduate in an apartment where there is not as much room. When field reps, also known as Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructors (RGDMI) ask graduates questions, they’re trying to find out what the causation is. Many times, graduates already know that when a dog is in a certain type of situation, the dog will exhibit this type of behavior. You already know when that behavior is going to show up. When we move from room to room, we’re going to move under control and move nicely. We want to establish a pattern. These situations never resolve overnight. It takes a while to unravel an undesirable behavior pattern. You’re trying to get ahead of the bad behavior, and then we’re asking, what do we want instead? We also want to stay away from “testing” to see if the dog has learned the new behavior yet. We have the temptation as handlers to want to check our work after a day or two. That is not appropriate, because as soon as we begin testing them, we take two steps back. Fight that temptation to check your work. We need for some days to go by so that the new pattern, that new behavior, can set.

Terri: When I trained with my current dog at the Guiding Eyes campus, we would have the dog follow us on leash, then we would unclip the leash and see if the dog would continue to follow us. We would check in with the dogs, and once in a while, we would give the “touch” command. The “touch” command ensures that the dogs are walking at our pace and that they are not getting ahead of us. This is a transition to off-leash work.

Mike G: Initially, keep your dog on leash as you move from room to room. Eventually, walk part of the way on leash, then reach down as you reward and/or praise your dog, and unclip the leash. Continue to walk, stop, praise, reward, then clip the leash on again. In this way, it becomes about the reward, rather than about whether or not the dog is unleashed.

Question: As a raiser, I am interested in learning strategies to teach our puppies not to take socks or shoes. Sometimes, my puppy will walk past the clothes basket and snatch an item.

Brian: This is a similar question to counter surfing and staying out of the trash. Every dog has something that interests them, whether it’s checking out the trash or taking socks and shoes. You have to assess where the puppy is in their training program. For the first couple of months when the puppy gets to our house, it’s about removing the distractable objects. Eventually, the puppy will have the maturity to deal with it. At that time, we introduce it as a novel object, then we try to call them off that object, reward them when they come off of it, and ignore them when they are on it. Dogs are attention-driven, and they want your affection. If you’re not giving them the affection they crave, the behavior is not as desirable. When you give them affection/reward for disengaging, that is what they want. I’ll hold a sock in my hand. If the puppy doesn’t go for it, I give the puppy a treat. If the puppy reacts to the sock, I put it away. I only do that literally once. As the dog’s maturity gets stronger, we’ll do it a couple more times. Eventually I’ll set the sock on the ground. I reward them if they don’t react to it. Remember, baby steps, all the way through. More attention is given by the handler if the dog does not react to the object than if the dog reacts to that same object. It is about giving positive rewards for good behavior. Ignore the dog when you get a behavior you don’t want.

Mike G: Sometimes it’s good to have a substitute item to replace the undesirable one. Being able to engage our dog in obedience and other positive behaviors is important.

Terri: My dog likes his bone. If someone comes to the door, he comes right to me with the bone. He doesn’t pick up any shoes or clothing.

GEB Graduate (comment from the audience): I use Bitter Apple on objects I want my dog to avoid.

Question: What is the protocol for dealing with excessive barking?

Brian: Nearly every puppy starts off as a barker. We crate them if they bark. The crate gets covered with a blanket. 99% of the time, that cures it. As soon as the dog stops barking, the blanket comes up a little bit. If they continue to be quiet, the blanket comes up a bit more. If they start barking again, the blanket goes down again. This technique usually works like a charm.

Question: What do you do if a senior dog begins barking when the dog has never engaged in that behavior before?

Brian: Try the crate and the blanket.

Mike G: The blanket method may be something your senior GEB dog is familiar with. There may also be early canine dementia with a dog of advanced age. If crating and covering the crate with a blanket causes anxiety, discontinue doing that and call the school for further advice.

Question: My dog is engaging in attention-seeking barking. Obedience routines stop the barking. But when I go back to the computer, my dog starts barking again. What can I do?

Mike G: You might want to change up your routine a bit. Communicating with humans is ideal for Guiding Eyes dogs. The dog wants to elicit communication with you. We want to try to change that pattern. Do some playtime before sitting down to your computer. The dogs are all crate-trained, as well as tie-down trained. When you are ready to go on the computer, crate your dog and then check in on the dog periodically. Try to meet your dog part-way if the dog wants to be active. This may be what your dog is communicating to you. Before you go to the computer, either give the dog a toy, do “go place”, or crate the dog and occasionally check in with the dog.

Question: Are puppy raisers provided with a list of house manners to work on?

Brian: Yes. There is a checklist of things we are to expose the puppies to and things we are to teach them. We learn most of these things in puppy class. The raisers and their puppies are required to attend classes, held every other week. Distractions and other things are addressed and worked on during class. Someone coming to the door is something we go over in class.

Question: Are raisers provided with lists of commands and house manners to teach the dogs?

Brian: We work on most of these things during class, which happens every other week. We work through distractions, what happens when the doorbell rings, Etc. Crating is a technique we use quite a lot.

Question: Is the blanket technique something that all raisers are expected to use with their puppies, or was this a technique you developed yourself?

Brian: We were taught this technique by Guiding Eyes for the Blind. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen it in print. We all know this technique well in my region. The fact that so many of you are dealing with barking is concerning to me because we spend so much time as puppy raisers working on that.

Mike G: It’s a tried-and-true method that has been around forever. I don’t know if it is an official part of the puppy raising program. Fortunately, the issue of barking doesn’t come up a lot. We can put the dog at our feet, we can put the dog on leash, or we can put the dog in a crate. We can also show the dog other self-soothing techniques, such as picking up a toy and bringing it to the handler, a less obnoxious behavior than barking.

Question: How do you deal with wildlife and hiking with your guide dog? What if you encounter a bear?

Mike G: There are times when it’s just better not to take your guide with you. You present entirely differently to wildlife when you have a predator at the end of a leash. When you’re in a situation you’ve never been in before, it can be safer for the both of you to leave your dog at home. You’re saying, “I’m going to check this situation out for myself, then decide if it’s safe for my guide to accompany me the next time.”

Question: My guide won’t drop an object if I say “Drop it”. Also, can a dog tell you it needs to go out by putting a bell on a door? My dog doesn’t know “out” or “drop it”.

Brian: “Out” is a hard skill set to learn. “Out” might not be as valuable to the dog as any reward it might get. I would just go back and re-train “out” like a puppy raiser would, a thousand times. See if you can get him back to square one. I’ve only trained one dog with a bell, and that was during COVID, when I had my dog for an extended period of time. It didn’t work well for me. We were just trying to think of exercises to keep the dog mentally sharp. We don’t normally teach the dogs to ring a bell. That’s not part of puppy raiser training protocol.

Terri: I was having a hard time reading when my dog needed to go out, and we were having some accidents in the house. The GEB instructors told me to try teaching him the bell technique. Now I can ask my dog, “Do you need to go potty?” and if he needs to, he’ll jump up and ring the bell But I still haven’t gotten him to do it voluntarily.

Mike G: You can use the “touch” command to teach your dog to ring a bell. In the beginning, you can bump the bell, then you’re the one actually activating the bell. In the beginning, you are just rewarding the “touch”. Eventually, you can entice the dog to bump your hand when the bell rings. Make sure you’re giving your dog plenty of opportunities to associate the word “bell” with touching the bell. When you’re adding a new thing, don’t ask the dog to do the new command quickly. Go slowly as you introduce the new concept. If the dog doesn’t yet know what ‘bell” means, then you’re poisoning your command work. You need to spend plenty of time making sure the dog can associate the jingle of the bell with the treat. Initially you’re going to ask for it when you’re standing right by it. Teaching the bell is pretty simple and pretty handy. When you teach your dog something as a handler, there is a special bond/relationship that forms between you and your dog.

Question: There are some things in my backyard I need my dog to avoid. I have apples growing. How should I handle this?

Mike G: Have someone rake up those apples as thoroughly as possible. Kitty litter and apples are both things that are driven by a Labrador’s appetite. You’re up against food.

Question: Do most dogs react when they feel some type of threat?

Mike G: It depends on the dog. The raisers spend quite a bit of time teaching the dogs not to bark. If the dog has learned its lessons well from the raiser, it generally will not bark when it sees a threat. The default is to not bark. I don’t know if barking at a bear or other threat is a good idea. If you or your dog feel threatened, we need to address it.

Jywanza thanked the panelists. The call concluded with a rollcall of the GEB graduates.

Contact the Graduate Council at: gebgradcouncil@gmail.com if you have further questions or comments.