

## Doable vs *Realistically* Doable

By Paul Owens, [The Original Dog Whisperer](#)

A few times a year, every trainer finds himself or herself in a difficult situation. A new client has a dog with one or more behavioral issues but after speaking with the client and evaluating the dog and the dog's environment, the trainer comes to the conclusion that the likelihood of getting the dog to a level of safety and behavioral reliability is iffy at best. These often become very emotionally difficult situations.

Most often, people form close, loving bonds with their dog and want to do everything they can to find a solution. But sometimes it's just not possible. The trainer is forced to be professionally responsible but at the same time, be empathetic and sensitive. It's a tough balancing act.

There are five criteria that can be reviewed in order to help the decision-making process along and to do what's best for the dog and his or her human family.

Almost always, unwanted or problem behaviors can be changed, that is, "*it's doable.*" A trainer will demonstrate the exact training methods that need to be learned and practiced and will set up a step-by-step program to give the family an idea of what's in store. But training is only one aspect. Whether the dog's behavior can be appreciably modified is based on five criteria that determine whether the situation is "*realistically doable.*"

These five criteria are:

**Time** Does the family have the time to spend training their dog, playing with their dog, socializing their dog? In the busy, fast-paced, hectic lifestyle that we live in, sometimes it is virtually impossible for people to set aside the time necessary for any appreciable behavioral changes to take root. A classic example: People who are away from home 10 to 12 hours a day will have a difficult time raising any dog...especially a puppy. And as to how long it will take, when people are told that a particular behavioral issue can take up to a year, and sometimes longer to get resolved, that can really be a jolt.

**Money** Working with a skilled, competent professional costs money as well as time. Depending on the behavioral problem being addressed, the amount of money spent on training sessions can add up. Money is also a prime consideration if there are behavioral issues relating to the dog's health to consider. Vet visits get pricey too.

**Emotional Commitment** It is emotionally draining if a person is spending hours during the day worrying about whether a living room is being destroyed because of their dog's separation anxiety or if there's poop all over the floor or whether the older incumbent dog is finding it difficult adjusting to the new reactive dog or if the neighbors are calling the apartment's landlord because of the incessant barking or if there's no money for medical bills or whether

the dog is going to bite someone. The list goes on and on and the emotional stress on the family takes a toll and can begin to affect our relationships at work and at home.

**Skills** I am horrible with anything having to do with computers. I'm not a mechanic, a doctor, lawyer or opera singer. My skills are in the dog training world. And just like I can never become the least bit proficient in any of those other walks of life, many people simply cannot become skilled trainers. My dad was a great example. He loved our dogs but could not, for the life of him, be proactive in his training. And his timing was terrible. Yet he was a great firefighter, carpenter, electrician and baseball player. He loved dogs, but his skills in using prevention and management and teaching a dog basic behaviors was something he never grasped. None of our family dogs lived past the age of seven.

**Environment** People who live in apartments and adopt a serially vocal dog with separation anxiety are often given 30 days to fix the problem or else. People who adopt large reactive dogs with hair-trigger sound and motion sensitivity don't fit in well with a family who has three children under the age of five. If the family already has an older dog who is set in his ways or has any health problems that might include creaky joints, it makes for a stressful environment when a younger more reactive dog is brought into the home.

And living space is a definite consideration as to whether a training program will be effective. I once visited a client who was a hoarder. Things were piled in every room with only small walk ways leading from one room to another. And the outside was the same. There was no place for the dog to play, no place for training and no room for human or dog guests to visit which could help the dog's socialization.

Hoping for the best possible outcome, any decision made must also factor in what is best for the dog. Changing a dog's behavior is almost always do-able. But if three or more of the five criteria cannot be addressed, providing a dog with the training, socialization, play and medical care he or she needs is not realistically do-able. In those situations, the emotionally difficult choice of rehoming is an option that should be seriously considered.

If aggression is involved, sometimes only one of these factors is all that should be considered, especially if children are involved.