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Mason O'Bannon teaches his dog, a golden doodle named Chewy, how to pass other dogs without stopping during a class at Durango Dog College on Monday evening. The new class, taught by longtime breeder and owner of Durango Day Camp, Liz Fezell, focuses on teaching kids how to train and behave around dogs. Photo by Jennaye Derge

Unleashing family fun

Durango Family Dog Training teaches kids to train their pets
by Jen Reeder

It's a Monday evening in Bodo Park, and class is in session outside Durango Dog College. An 11-year-old boy and his younger sister lead their cocker spaniel mix past an 11-year-old-girl asking her Labrador retriever to "sit." Meanwhile, instructor Liz Fezell is helping a 10-year-old boy teach his puppy to touch his hand on command.

"Say 'touch' like you're calling him to the most exciting party of his life," she says.

The dogs obey simultaneously, and the ribbit of clickers sounds as the kids reach for treats to reward their pets. It's music to Fezell's ears.

"Kids are really great at clicker training," she says. "I tell them, 'When you click the clicker, it's like taking a picture of what your dog did right.' They catch onto it so fast."

Positive training with clickers is a key element to all of Fezell's dog training classes for children and families. Through her new business, Durango Family Dog Training, Fezell offers a variety of classes such as the Monday leash manners class that focuses on strengthening the bond between kids and their dogs. This includes everything from obedience training to recognizing dog behavior signs such as stress or the best way to pet a dog (on the side of the neck rather than the top of the head, for example). Some classes are kids-only, and some are for the entire family.

"The primary focus is teaching families how to have a good relationship with their dog," Fezell says. "Nothing makes me happier than to see a family happy with their dog, and the dog happy with their family. It's very meaningful."

She also likes helping prevent dog bites. She's seen children start her classes wrestling with their dogs or doing other things to potentially provoke the animal and then learn to act "in a positive way" with them. Another plus is the confidence the kids develop.

"How often does a child get to teach somebody how to do something?" she asks. "It's a really great way to teach confidence as well as basic dog skills."

Fezell is uniquely qualified to teach the classes. Six years ago she started Durango Day Camp, which serves 150 kids each summer. She is a renowned breeder of standard poodles, volunteers as a therapy dog handler with her pups, and took her first dog-training class when she was just 8 years old.

“I’ve always just been really fascinated with the way that dogs learn and the best way to teach dogs,” she says. “Dog training has changed a lot in the last 25 years. We’ve gone from using things like choke chains and prong collars to positive training methods. Dogs respond so much better to it.”

Fezell is thrilled to offer her classes through Durango Dog College because every dog trainer at the school uses positive training methods. And Traci Moriarty, founder and “dean” of Durango Dog College, is excited about the college’s latest “professor.”

“We are so happy to be able to add a kids-only class to our ever-growing class schedule,” Moriarty says. “Liz’s knowledge and experience with children combined with her years of raising poodles makes her the perfect teacher to combine dogs and kids in one class, as well as a great addition to the Durango Dog College family.”

Students and parents agree. Lauryn Christensen, 9, is taking her third class with Fezell, who she says is “awesome.” The loose leash class has helped her cocker spaniel mix, Maggie, learn to pass another dog while walking on a leash without stopping to sniff the other canine.

“This class has helped her improve a lot,” she says.

Lauryn adds that she’s learned a lot, too. She used to rush up to dogs she’d see while walking around town and start petting them and talking into their faces. Now she asks permission from the owner first.

Maggie is the family’s first dog, though they’ve had gerbils and other pets in the past. Her older brother, Flynn, 11, says they love Maggie and will dress her in a peanut butter costume for Halloween (while the humans plan to don jellyfish costumes). He’s glad the classes are helping Maggie overcome her fear around strangers, and he enjoys learning how to help her.

“The classes teach you how to teach the dogs,” he says. “You learn how to teach dogs tricks and how to walk them. And you learn dog behavior traits.”

Mason O’Bannon, 10, says he likes the leash manners class, which he takes with his miniature golden doodle Chewy, a shaggy brown puppy who does indeed resemble a baby Wookiee.

“Chewy likes the class too because he gets a lot of treats,” he says. “It helps with his jumping a lot.”

Mason’s mom, Janet, says she leaves during the classes so that she won’t interfere with the training sessions. She’s happy her son is doing so well; when Mason was younger, he was bitten on the stomach by a dog at a playground.

“I’m so glad the class is for kids. He needs to learn how to control Chewy,” she says, adding that she recommends Fezell’s classes to other parents.

Upcoming classes include “Coming When Called” for kids, and a family class on basic obedience. Though group sizes are small to allow for a lot of individual attention, Fezell also offers 1-on-1 in-home training.

“The goal is to have happy dogs and happy owners teaching dogs how to learn,” she says. “I love working with kids, and I love working with dogs – those are my two favorite things to do. I don’t even feel like I’m working. I love it so much.”

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