

BUSINESS

Tips for Training Your Dog Via Zoom: Sit, Stay, Don't Lick the Screen

Richard Fischhof proves you can teach old dogs—and young coronavirus puppies—new tricks. Yes, even man's best friend can learn to social distance



Good Dog Atlanta owner Richard Fischhof and his 8-month-old black standard poodle, Blu, finish a virtual dog-training session on Thursday.

PHOTO: GOOD DOG ATLANTA

By [Rachel Feintzeig](#)

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The student had had enough. Thirty minutes into the private Zoom lesson, he crawled under his parents' bed. Despite their best efforts to coax him out, little Murphy wouldn't budge. Class canceled.

The pupil in question was a 9-week-old Cavalier King Charles Spaniel mix; the teacher, 73-year-old Richard Fischhof of Good Dog Atlanta. Mr. Fischhof has been training man's best friend for 12 years, but had never used videoconferencing until the novel coronavirus started spreading.

Since early March, he's trained some 15 dogs—a golden retriever, a black lab, a shepherd mix and lots of goldendoodles and labradoodles—remotely. Murphy's trepidation was an aberration; with the exception of one other puppy who escaped his lesson by crawling through a fence, the dogs have generally made for rapt pupils.

MAKING IT WORK

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different people are coping with the stresses and risks. Previous articles in the series:

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- [Before Coronavirus, She Made Parts for Ford for 26 Years—Now She Makes Ventilators](#)
- [A Neurosurgeon Takes New Role to Care for Coronavirus Patients and Families](#)
- [Rule No. 1 for Census Volunteers During Coronavirus: Ask How Someone Is Doing](#)
- [She Polices Social Distancing at Kraft's Mac-and-Cheese Factory During Coronavirus](#)
- [People Are Finally Eager to Visit the Dentist](#)
- [Read the full series here.](#)

Even via computer, they respond to the sound of Mr. Fischhof's voice. Some stick their wet nose straight in front of the camera to better observe—and maybe try to sniff—their trainer.

Mostly, though, Mr. Fischhof is teaching dogs to sit, lie down and stay by communicating with exasperated owners instead of their pup. Many are at their wits' end, exasperated by home-office mates that bark every time they dial the boss or attempt to exit the room.

“Wait, you can't leave me. Let's go do something,” Mr. Fischhof said, explaining how four-legged friends feel.



Mr. Fischhof charges \$75 for the hourlong sessions, down from \$120 for his old in-person private training.

PHOTO: GOOD DOG ATLANTA

He advises owners to distract their pets by offering them a challenge that includes a tasty reward. One trick: hiding food in empty boxes placed around the house, a sort of dog scavenger hunt. Freezing a hollow Kong dog toy stuffed with treats, yogurt and water can buy 30 minutes of peace during a conference call, Mr. Fischhof said.

He also offers clients quarantine-specific tips, like how to social distance while walking the dog—keep a short leash, tell onlookers there is no petting. The basics, like getting dogs to come when called or go to their beds, are still in demand too.

Mr. Fischhof has gotten many inquiries from people who rushed out to get new puppies as a quarantine coping mechanism only to find themselves overwhelmed and exhausted from 2 a.m. bathroom trips and general puppy insubordination.

“People bit off more than they could chew,” he said.



During virtual sessions, Mr. Fischhof models the moves with Blu, running through the motions five times before coaching his clients through practicing with their dogs.

PHOTO: GOOD DOG ATLANTA

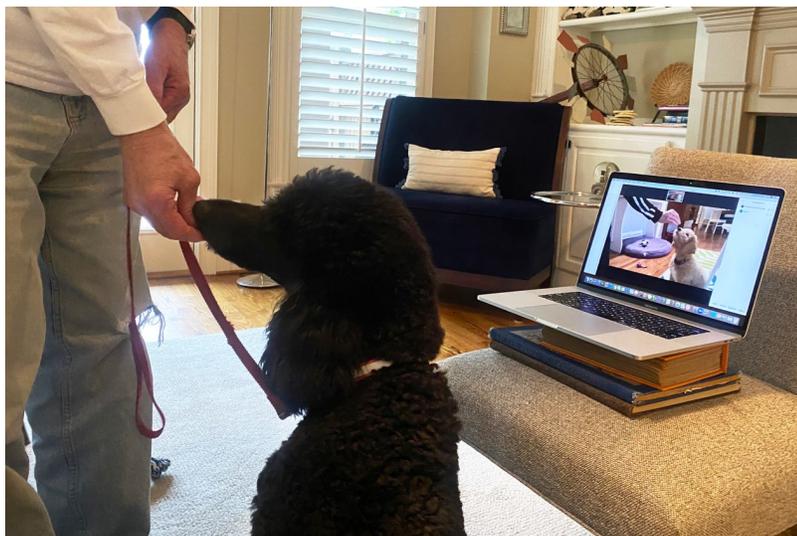
During virtual sessions, Mr. Fischhof models the moves with his 8-month-old black standard poodle, Blu, running through the motions five times before coaching his clients through practicing with their dogs. Occasionally, things get noisy: Blu’s ears perk up and he’ll bark back to the dog on the other side of the screen.

“English is a second language for them,” Mr. Fischhof said of dogs, noting it’s important to have patience, especially when trying to teach canines virtually.

“I can’t reach in the screen and show them.”

Mr. Fischhof charges \$75 for the hourlong sessions, down from \$120 for his old in-person private training. Overall, his income has dropped more than 90%, he said.

Once a week, he used to teach a puppy kindergarten class with six to eight adorable participants and their parents. Now, he's trying to envision what it might look like when it's safe to resume.



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Will he prop the door open so no one has to touch it? Have people bring their own chairs? The free play between classmates will definitely be nixed, he said, and families will have to spread more than the current two leash-lengths apart.

Georgia is in the process of reopening its economy, but Mr. Fischhof feels it's too soon to venture out to see his clients. He's considering offering socially distant sessions later this month; he might conduct an initial class via Zoom and then check in on the dog outdoors, meeting in a client's driveway and standing more than 6 feet back. He'd be too nervous to touch the dog's leash. And yet, he misses puppies.

"A puppy comes right up to you," he said. "They'll still have the nice little puppy breath. They're all so cuddly and cute, and it's like, you have a blank slate there."

The good news: Mr. Fischhof is sure dogs are loving the stay-at-home orders in place across the country. Having company for nearly 24 hours a day is all they have ever wanted.

"I think the dogs are doing a lot better than the owners are," he said. For canines, the anxiety might come as America reopens.

"When everybody starts going back to work, that could be a problem."