

Queen of the Couch: How to Deal with Dogs that Won't Let You Use "Their" Furniture

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Hollywood makes fun of it and many vets across the country warn us against it - dogs that love their comfy couches and king-sized beds so much that they won't let the humans who bought the furniture use it! While it's funny to watch our favorite comedian get chased away from a love seat, it's not so funny to have it happen in our own homes. On the other hand, we don't need to banish our dogs to the floor forever no matter what, which is what many vets and old-school trainers recommend. There can be a happy medium if you and your dog have an understanding of each other.

If your dog currently shows no problems with you or anyone else sharing the couch, bed, or chair with them, that's great. I still recommend the following training exercise because it's good manners. If your dog has ever resisted letting you onto the furniture at all, then you definitely need to work on this training exercise, *in addition to working with a dog trainer or behaviorist who is comfortable and experienced in working with dog aggression issues.*

While your dog is laying on her favorite piece of furniture, either show her a treat or her favorite toy. Let her get excited about the treat/toy, then toss it playfully away from the couch so "Queenie" has to get off the couch to get it. This means the treat needs to be fantastic - liver sausage, left over roast beef, whatever excites her more than lying on the couch does. If food won't motivate her, take away her favorite toy and bring it out only for this training exercise. As Queenie gets off the couch, tell her "off", "floor", "get up" or whatever command you and your family have decided you will consistently use. Repeat this exercise whenever you get the chance. When Queenie starts moving to anticipate her treat or toy, say the command before offering her reward, but be sure to give the reward immediately after she gets off the furniture.

Your dog also needs to know that she can only get on the couch with you with your permission. Teaching a "couch" command is usually pretty easy since it's something that the dog wants to do anyway. If Queenie starts to get on the couch without your permission, stand up, give her the command to get off, reward her for getting off the couch, and either tell her to lay on the floor or then give her the command to come up by you. Don't let her slip and come up on her own "just once" because she's cute, you're tired, or you were going to let her up anyway. If she wants furniture time with you, she needs to earn it. As long as your dog understands the furniture rule and respects it, there is no reason not to let the dog on the furniture. (Unless, of course, you don't WANT the dog on the furniture!)



If at any point Queenie shows any aggression - she gets stiff, lifts a lip, snarls, growls, snaps, barks, or anything else nasty - or if she just refuses to move, have Queenie drag around a 4-8 foot long line. You can make one by tying clothes line onto her collar or a leash clip or by using an old leash. *(Note: NEVER leave a long line on a dog when she is unsupervised as it can be a choke hazard. Using a line without a handle or cutting the handle on an old leash is an additional safety precaution.)* This long line gives you the chance to enforce your command without putting yourself within striking distance of your dog's powerful jaws. Chances are she won't bite, but the possibility is there so it's best to minimize it. You never want to tell the dog to do something that you can't back up, so if Queenie ignores the command, gently pull on the long line to help her off the furniture, then throw treats on the ground for her or play a quick game with her favorite toy as a reward. Keep in mind she did do what you wanted and should be rewarded, even if you had to help her.

If Queenie consistently has problems whenever she is on the furniture, then Queenie needs to lose all furniture privileges. Do not invite her to be up with you on the furniture and always enforce, with the long line if necessary, the "no Queenie on the couch" rule. Some people can't be trusted to obey the rules of the road and lose their driver's licenses. If Queenie can't be trusted to obey the rules of the furniture; she loses her couch potato license.

In some cases, Queenie will listen beautifully to some members of the family, but will resist or show aggression to other people. If this is the case, all good things in Queenie's life stop unless they are given to her by the person she won't listen to. This person should feed Queenie (by hand, a few pieces at a time if possible), be the one to let her out first thing in the morning and last thing at night, put her leash on her for walks, play with her favorite toys, take Queenie to training class, etc. Queenie should also immediately be put on a Nothing In Life is Free (NILIF) or Dog's Opportunity To Earn (DOTE) program. Essentially the dog has to do something a human asks her to do before she gets things she wants. The entire family should do this, particularly the person that Queenie doesn't listen to. If Queenie wants to be petted, she has to sit before anyone will touch her. If Queenie gets a treat, she has to lay down before she can eat it. Queenie needs to sit before you throw the ball in fetch, etc. It doesn't matter what command Queenie does, she just needs to obey the human BEFORE she gets what she wants. This is a very benevolent, but effective way to teach Queenie that the humans rank above her in the family pack. (This is a very simplified version of NILIF/DOTE. For more detailed information, read Jean Donaldson's book *The Culture Clash* or look around <http://www.clickersolutions.com/> for more information.)

Please keep in mind that aggression should never be punished with aggression. For one thing, humans can rarely issue "dog-like" physical corrections in the exact manner that a dog would issue the correction. The result is a confused or insulted dog. Second, and more importantly, the dog is showing aggressive behavior for one of two reasons - she's scared or

she's convinced that she's in charge and *you* need to obey *her*. If she's scared and you physically punish her, you are teaching the dog that she has a good reason to be afraid of you and that she needs to increase her efforts to scare you away. If she's on a power trip, she may try to meet your physical correction with a physical correction of her own. Either way, physical corrections set humans up for a nasty bite, especially since the dog is usually closer to face level when she is on furniture.

If you feel that a punishment greater than just getting off the furniture is needed, take something away from the dog that she wants. Tell her "time out" in a matter-of-fact tone of voice and put her in a crate or a room with no furniture or family members. Stop petting or playing with her. Put the treats away. Completely ignore her, no matter what she does. As soon as she obeys, give her back what she wants - attention, toys, treats, etc. These punishments can be issued without anger, without ever touching the dog and are usually very effective because the dog can make the immediate connection between their refusal and the thing they like going away.

Allowing dogs on the furniture can be done in a safe, problem-free way. It probably won't magically happen and it definitely won't happen overnight. But by establishing rules with your dog, and enforcing them, you will be well on your way to having a dog that can cuddle with you and time or place you want.

