

# Both Ends of the Leash

## The Senior Citizen Pass:

**It's okay to give an old dog a break, as long as you keep her brain and body active**

**Patricia B. McConnell**



Lassie doesn't sit anymore, at least not when I ask her to. Mind you, this is the dog who came when called no matter what, who stuck by my side through thick and thin and who outdid her movie-star namesake on a daily basis. If there'd been a Timmy on the farm and he'd fallen in the well, Lassie would've dragged a rope over and hauled him out, right after she called 911 and the closest neighbor.

These days when I ask her to sit, she looks at me blankly and remains standing. She's 15 now and losing her hearing, so the first time it happened, I assumed she didn't hear me. I gave her the visual signal I've used since I got her. Nothing. I let her smell some meat in my hand and moved it to lure her into a sit. She stood solid on four paws, raised her head and looked directly into my eyes. Granted, it's dangerous to imagine what a dog is thinking, but in this case, I'd bet the farm that if Lassie could speak, this is what she would've said: "I'm sorry; I don't do that anymore. I'm too old."

I'm not sure why Lassie refuses to sit. Perhaps it hurts to do so (her wrists are arthritic) or perhaps she simply thinks she shouldn't have to; it might be a bit of both. In many ways, it doesn't matter. Ever since that day, I've granted Lassie a "senior citizen pass." After all, she's almost deaf, she's losing her sight and sometimes she seems as frail as a sparrow. Lest you start feeling sorry for her, I should also mention that she initiates tug games with young Will (and holds her own), plays fetch with eyes shining and loves long walks in the woods. She's doing inspiringly well for a Border Collie of her age, but there's no doubt I've changed my expectations of her, just as I would of any noble, elderly woman well into her 90s.

I've also changed my own behavior. Every night I give her head rubs and acupressure massages before we go to bed. She gets to sleep upstairs in the cushy dog bed while young Will is relegated to the first floor at night. Recently, someone raised an eyebrow when I admitted that I let Lassie lick the dinner plate when I'm done with it (if I'm so rude as to eat everything myself, I find something else to give her).

"Ooooh!" said my critic. "So even you spoil your dogs!" Well, of course I do. Good heavens. Lassie has been a friend and co-worker since the day I got her at 11 months of age. She's worked sheep and dog-dog aggression cases with me for 13 years. She pushed a 300-pound ram off the highway in a sleet storm and taught a dangerously reactive Hound-mix how to greet other dogs. She got me through the darkest winter of my life and still smiles and body wags every spring when I gush over newborn lambs. Now she is old and frail and vulnerable, and like all of the elderly – whether two-legged or four – she deserves to be treated with respect and consideration.

However, like all old dogs, Lassie deserves more than a comfy place to sleep and some evening belly rubs. Older dogs, like older humans, need to move to stay healthy, and it is up to us to ensure that they get the exercise they need. Of course, we need to be thoughtful about what we ask them to do. The walks might need to be shorter or even eliminated altogether in extreme weather. Leaps after flying discs or elegant jumps over agility equipment should probably be things of the past. But that doesn't mean that exercise isn't important. If anything, as our dogs get older, it is even more important than when they were young.

It's not just our aging dogs' bodies that need exercise;

their brains need our attention too. Advances in neurobiology and human medicine have made it crystal clear that “use it or lose it” refers as literally to our minds as it does our bodies (as though they were separate!). There is no biological reason this wouldn't apply equally to our dogs' brains.

A wonderful way to exercise your dog's mind is to teach new tricks. You probably don't want to ask an older dog to “jump through a hoop,” but you can ask her to do a play bow to stretch out before going on a walk, or to hide her head under a pillow when you ask “Are you ashamed of yourself?”

The combination of trick training (and its inherent mental exercise) and healthy movements that allow your dog to stay strong and flexible is ideal for older dogs. Lassie rarely gets out the door without being asked to “take a bow,” which stretches out her stiff right shoulder. You can teach your dogs to lie flat on their side when you say “acupuncture” if you use Chinese medicine, and you can teach them to stand on the vet's scale to be weighed. Some dogs could strengthen their hindquarters by learning “sit pretty” (it could be injurious for others, so talk to your veterinarian about what movements would be best for your dog at this stage in life).

Lassie is sound asleep at my feet as I write this – not surprising, since she sleeps more now than she did when she was younger. She's also more anxious when I pack to travel, shadowing me so closely that I have to pay attention to avoid tripping over her. She reminds me of my mother in the last few years of her life, when all she wanted was to be in a safe and quiet place, surrounded by the people she loved and trusted.

I wish I could be there every moment of every day for Lassie – but like most of us, I can't. But I can be aware that she still needs her body and her brain stimulated. She also needs – or at least deserves – to cuddle on the couch when she feels like it, and to nose into my dinner plate as soon as I'm done eating. I think tonight I will read Jenny Joseph's famous poem, “When I Am Old I Will Wear Purple,” to her:  
*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple./With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me./...I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired/And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells/*

*And run my stick along the public railings/And make up for the sobriety of my youth.*

You go, Lassie girl. I'll order you a purple collar tonight.

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