Hand Me Your Head and Beyond

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Photos by Ruth Sweet — The Basenji, January/February 2009

As much fun as it is to teach your dog silly pet tricks, these are tricks that can come in very useful.

Hand Me Your Head is one of Amelia’s little tricks. She puts her chin on the palm of my hand. How useful is that? It’s great if I need to pill her or do something with her mouth or teeth, or check her ears.

How do you pill a dog? Before you need to give actual medications, make some hamburger “pills” and teach your dog to let you open its mouth and pop one in. When you need to give the real thing, your dog will already know how to take it. Canned cheese is your friend for pill giving, but sometimes you need to pill without food. Even then, coating the pill with a little butter or margarine will help it slip right down. There’s nothing ickier than getting a pill stuck in your throat.

Amelia got an ear infection when she was a puppy, and after a few days of chasing her around, sitting on her, spraying ear medications all over the living room/bedroom/hallway/kitchen and getting none in her ears, I decided to quit. So I taught her to let me hold her ears then to let me
put the meds in, then to let me knead the base of the ears to spread the meds around. It made life simpler and more pleasant for both of us. But like everyone else, I never thought to train this as a trick! I didn’t do it ’til I needed it, and had already made life harder than it needed to me.

**Joey’s Eyes** is Joey’s trick. When his uveitis was first diagnosed, I was sent home with three kinds of eye drops, with instructions to dose him with one or the other eight times a day. That’s EIGHT times a day. The first set of drops sounded like World War III — y’all know the kind of noise a basenji can make when it is displeased. And Joey was extremely displeased and didn’t care who knew it! Canned cheese is our friend—every eye drop was followed by a squiirt of cheese. It took one day to get Joey to sit down, and lift his chin for his eye drops. He still occasionally gives a little grrr, just so I remember that this is NOT his favorite thing, but as long as the cannned cheese holds out, we’re ok. And now we’re down to only one dose a day.

**Restrain Your Dog.** Any kind of handling or restraining can be trained at home as a silly trick, and your vet will looooove you for it! It is easiest to teach puppies, just hold the pup, and as soon as it stops wiggling and relaxes, let it go! The letting go is the reward for being relaxed while being held. Dogs are quick to pick up on what works. Hold your dog as if (s)he were on the vet’s exam table— one arm around his/her neck, the other around the body. If the dog is comfortable being held like this, it will make procedures like drawing blood or giving vaccinatons much more pleasant for your dog. It only takes a few minutes’ training time each day, and you’ll have a vet’s office star.