



## What is Nothing in Life is Free (NILIF)?

Nothing in Life is Free (commonly abbreviated NILIF) is a proactive resource-management protocol that sets clear parameters for both dogs and owners in order to facilitate the development of a healthy, appropriate relationship between dog and owner. It's actually a lot like entering a time machine and traveling back to 1950.

## Who should use it and when?

NILIF is safe for just about anyone to use anytime. The following is a list of circumstances in which NILIF can and should be implemented:

- You have just brought home a new dog, especially a juvenile or adult dog that has prior history in a different home or environment (6 months or older)
- You want to do obedience training with your dog--NILIF is a great way to set the stage
- Your dog interacts with you in a needy, controlling, possessive, or pushy way
- Your dog has an emotionally-seeded behavior problem you'd like to address, especially aggression, insecurity, or anxiety

## How it works

NILIF puts you in control of resources that are meaningful to your dog. By taking control of these resources, you insinuate yourself into a prominent and appropriate role for your dog as:

- Someone that has control of their surrounding environment (trustworthy & reliable)
- Someone worth paying attention to and even trying to "figure out" how to please (a leader)

## What are resources for the average dog?

- Food (meals and treats)
- You (your attention/play with you)
- Access/Freedom (to the outdoors, to other pets/playmates, to prime locations in the home, to the neighborhood, to you)
- Toys

## How do you implement NILIF and what are the guidelines?

In order to effectively implement NILIF, we have to re-train you, the human. It is recommended that you implement NILIF 100% and not pick and choose which elements you like most or are easiest for you. There are a couple of instances below where I'll give a "Mild" and "Major" form of the resource control being discussed. Implement whichever one seems to best fit your situation.

**Food: Mild Form - Stop free feeding.** Two or three meals are provided each day on a mostly-regular schedule. Food is put down for 10 to 20 minutes. If your dog is likely to get distracted, baby-gate or crate them in proximity with their food. Once the time is up, the food is picked up, regardless of how much was or wasn't eaten. Ironically, this is also a great way to address a picky eater (medical issues notwithstanding).

Working really hard to get your dog to eat is very reinforcing to picky eaters--they get a lot of attention for not eating and often they get better and better entrees for holding out.

**Food: Major Form - hand feed.** For dogs that are very possessive of their food, food dish, or treats, stop free feeding and start hand-feed your dog his meals. He should be fed his meal from your hand, a handful at a time, if it's safe for you to do so. If it's not safe to feed directly from your hand yet, then feed him by removing portions of a meal from his bowl in your hand to another bowl for him to eat out of on the floor until the meal is gone.

**No more treats just for being cute.** I've never met a dog that didn't know how to "sit" for a treat. Even if it's something as simple as sit, or something as valuable as coming when called, only give your dog treats that are earned, for doing something. Don't give away these valuable resources for free. If you're incorporating treats into

your training, all the better. Proceed with your training as you normally would, incorporating mini training sessions into your day.

**Do not respond to his solicitation for attention.** In imbalanced relationships, dogs control when it's time to play and interact. They demand your attention and you give it to them. They might do this by resting their head in your lap and staring plaintively up into your eyes, by tossing a ball at you or nudging your hand, or by biting or barking at you. Stop responding to these requests. Ignore your dog when he solicits. If your dog has a reliable "go away" command you can use that; for my dogs, "go park it" means "go be anywhere besides in my face right now." Otherwise, simply ignore. Any response, even a negative one like a "NO!" or a shove away could be reinforcing for your dog (remember the kid in math class that would sit behind you and pull your hair? Exactly.).

In conjunction with this step, you need to do three other things:

1. Make sure you ARE giving your dog adequate play time and attention by initiating it with him (perhaps as a reward for his being particularly quiet and well-mannered while you were working on the computer).
2. Pick up the majority of toys lying around. Allow access to a couple of safe chew toys so your dog has an appropriate outlet for that. Balls, frisbees, tug toys or anything destructible (like plush toys) should be removed and only brought out by you as a reward and ideally as part of time when you're engaging with your dog.
3. Do the "sit on the dog" exercise. This is another exercise used widely by many different trainers and is believed to have originated with Margot Woods. The point of this exercise is for your dog to learn how to deal with tedium. This is another exercise that I routinely recommend for all the same reasons as NILIF.

**Restrict Access - Mild Form: Close off any "problem" rooms and keep your dog off the furniture, including and most especially your bed.** For dogs that need to learn to respect some boundaries but that don't have serious aggression or dominance issues, keeping them off the furniture and out of "high value" rooms when unsupervised is sufficient. Nothing tells your dog that he is on the same "level" as you as sharing your furniture, especially your bed. Dominance and resource-guarding may not be a huge problem for your particular dog now and it may never be a problem. But for some dogs with certain temperaments, it's a very short distance and a quick escalation from happily sharing the space together to your dog guarding the space and not allowing YOU access. Suddenly, the dog you were sitting with on the couch last week won't be moved off the couch this week. THAT is a problem.

Your dog's physical place, at least until he knows his proverbial place, is on the floor. Get a couple new dog beds and place them in common areas in the home, re-implement use of his crate at night if he's going to sneak into your bed. The point isn't for him to suffer, but for him to be comfortable in the *right place*.

When he has access to furniture, make sure you're monitoring and keep a leash and collar on him. If he climbs up onto furniture, go to him calmly and without speaking. Make this non-confrontational. Grasp the leash and gently but firmly guide him down to the ground and over to an appropriate bed. If you want, say "off" once and in a normal tone of voice. Alternatively, you can use that leash to tether him to you or to something else in the home that restricts his access so he can't resume his position.

Climbing up on furniture at-will is a tough habit to break and it is much easier to simply not allow to develop in the first place. But if you've allowed him to commandeer furniture, commit to changing this behavior now. There may not be a single NILIF strategy that is more effective at re-establishing the correct parameters about resources than this one. Later, he will be allowed up to share your furniture but it will only be with your permission, not at-will, and he will be expected to vacate without fuss when told.

**Restrict Access - Major Form: Crate your dog and gradually give freedom.** This is the access protocol for especially pushy, dominant dogs, or for dogs that have threatened aggression or become aggressive with you. This isn't about punishment, but teaching contrast.

- For the first 3 weeks of implementation, crate your dog or baby gate him in a small, uninteresting room for 90% of his day. The idea is that he is very under-stimulated during this time. He shouldn't be suffering but he should be *bored*.
- Allow him a chew toy and a soft bed as long as he doesn't destroy it. Make sure the climate is comfortable, not too hot or too cold and allow access to water if necessary.
- Make sure he gets out for bathroom breaks as-needed.

- Give him a few treats when he goes into his confinement space politely.
- When you confine him, do so with a positive attitude--not an angry demeanor.
- When he's out (such as going to and from the yard or to eat), he's on a leash or line so you can immediately get control of him without having to plead for his cooperation, which undermines this effort significantly--he needs to learn you have control of his access and also his *movement*.

The protocol described above creates a stark contrast for your dog as he begins to see freedom and access as something he can get from you rather than something afforded to him automatically. He will start to look at freedom of access and movement differently. It's like when you go on a diet to try to lose weight. After you've spent a couple weeks on a very restricted diet, an apple starts to sound like desert, whereas before only chocolate cake would have satisfied you.

- After 3 weeks, begin to allow restricted and monitored access to parts of the home.
- Start with neutral rooms with minimal furniture, like the kitchen, dining room, and *not* bedrooms or the main sitting room/living room.
- Give 10-20 minutes a couple times on the first day and see what your dog does with this privilege.
- Keep a leash attached until he proves he has changed his attitude about trying to take control and follow the steps outlined in the section above. Is he excited to engage with you because he's just happy to be there instead of kenneled? Does he happily settle down on the floor instead of the couch because being on the floor near you is much better than his kennel, even if it's not as good as the couch? If so, you've successfully re-set his expectations.
- Keep allowing more and more free time and more and more access as he continues to demonstrate that he is committed to his new attitude.
- If he back-slides to his old, controlling ways, back up a step or two and proceed more slowly.

Now, rather than him only being satisfied when he's running the show, he's just glad to be part of things. That is exactly what you want.

**Quit the chatter.** Many people, especially those that live alone with their dog, maintain a running dialogue with their companion. They chatter to their dog constantly. While this isn't inherently bad, it creates a lot of noise for your dog to have to try to sift through, making it much more challenging for him to know when you really DO say something meaningful to him, like "come." One way to make yourself worthy of his attention is to only speak to him when it matters. Use silence to punctuate the important things you say to him. For our non-verbal canines, this can be a very powerful way to enhance communication.

## What NILIF is *Not*

This is not "ignore your dog" protocol. When you stop caving to your dog's solicitations and start correcting his taking liberties, you must also start to proactively recognize his good behavior and take those opportunities to initiate interaction with him. It goes from being his "job" to yours. Recognize the good and reward with a valuable resource that he otherwise cannot obtain on his own (your attention, play, a treat, a walk, a car ride, etc.) and ignore the "bad" or make sure he cannot do the "bad."

This is not "show the dog who's the boss by getting confrontational" protocol. All the recommendations above are carried out in a lovingly authoritative if not aloof manner. You're not being a pushover but you're not being an unforgiving disciplinarian either. Don't get in your dog's face, don't roll him on his back, don't yell, don't get mad. This type of aggressive behavior is actually seen by your dog as UNSTABLE behavior, and is unbecoming of a true leader.

Assume your dog just doesn't know any better and you're just going to keep reminding him with all the patience of a 1st grade teacher until he gets it. Stay cool and calm.

## It gets worse before it gets better - aka the behavior "extinction burst"

When you start to take control of your dog's environment and your interactions with your dog, you can expect him to find new and exciting ways to try to take control. Now that you've stopped his ability to control you by pawing at you, he may try to provoke a response by chewing up shoes. You may see an increase in the frequency, intensity, and duration of his pushy or naughty behavior. He's increasingly worried about losing control. Losing

control is stressful, but he will absolutely be happier for it (as will you) in the long run. You both just have to make the adjustment. This behavior burst is just the big finale before he finally accepts that this change has happened.

If you give in now, all your efforts will be for nothing and the behavior will be more reinforced than ever. Stay the course.

## When can you stop doing NILIF?

Phase out the protocol once your dog has demonstrated that they've had an attitude adjustment and their new-found respect has become automatic, or they have achieved whatever other behavior goals you have set. However, you may find that you want to continue with a degree of this routine for the life of your dog.