

21 Ways to Love Your Swissy Written by Dori Likevich

1) UNDERSTAND THE BREED.

Swissys are categorized in the Working Group of dogs, as are Rottweilers, Akitas, Mastiffs, Saint Bernards, Great Pyrenees, Kuvaszok, Doberman Pinschers and 12 other AKC-recognized breeds. Characteristically, working breeds have a tendency toward displays of dominance in their natures. Dominance is not necessarily a bad trait, if kept in check and channeled into constructive avenues. Dominance can provide a dog with “drive.” Working breeds possess drive. It is what makes them capable of performing the functions for which they were bred. However, if dominant displays are allowed to escalate into acts of aggression, whether toward people or other animals, this inappropriate and dangerous behavior is indicative that the dog is in control and not the human.

2) CRATE TRAIN YOUR SWISSY.

One way to exercise control over your Swissy is to establish a crate routine from the time you acquire your Swissy. In fact, the breeder of your Swissy may have already begun crate training with the litter of puppies before they traveled to their new homes. The advantages to crate training a dog are numerous. There are many excellent articles about why you should crate train your dog and how to go about a method of training suitable to you and your lifestyle. One of the best reasons to crate train your Swissy is to hasten the process of housetraining. Swissys are, characteristically, slow to house train. It is not unusual to learn that your Swissy may not be entirely reliable in the house until it is 8 months to 1 year of age. Another reason to crate train your Swissy is to ensure its safety. Swissy puppies are notorious for trying to bite, chew and digest everything in their path. Electrical cords, left within reach of a puppy, are enticing. Like a magnet, they can be drawn to a dangling cord. If a puppy bites into an electrical cord, the current can severely injure or kill the puppy.

3) TEACH YOUR SWISSY BITE INHIBITION.

Young Swissys are very ‘mouthy’. This is a common complaint among new Swissy owners. Almost every novice owner wants to know how he can get the puppy to stop biting hands, arms, legs, toes, shoes, and clothing. Swissys can be willful and stubborn, making it a challenge to teach bite inhibition. Yet, it is essential in the successful rearing of a young puppy. Ideally, puppies that were kept in their litter and with their mother until 8 weeks of age, should have learned some bite inhibition. Puppies can play brutally with one another, testing their boundaries. The squeal of a puppy who has been ‘bit’ in a play fight with a littermate will signal to that littermate that it has used too much pressure with its teeth. The puppy has been warned that it must learn to be gentler with its bite. If a puppy does not heed the warning from littermates, that puppy will soon learn that no one wants to play with him – until he changes his ways. You will discover there are differing opinions among trainers and educators concerning the most effective methods in teaching bite inhibition. Probably the most important thing you can take away from your research is that you must teach it to your puppy. Although sharp puppy teeth are quite uncomfortable when making contact with human skin, especially on a small child, the relative damage is little. However, as the dog grows into adulthood, he loses his baby teeth and acquires his adult teeth, which can cause significant damage.

4) CUDDLE, DON’T CODDLE YOUR SWISSY.

Coddling can be given another name – pampering. Although it is an easy habit to fall into, avoid pampering your dog at all costs. If you insist on coddling your puppy, in the long run, you will end up with a spoiled dog that has little or no self-confidence. A Swissy without self-confidence is insecure. Insecurity can result in bullying behavior. If the best way to assist a human child to grow into a happy and emotionally healthy adult is to nurture self-confidence and self-esteem, then the same is true of nurturing a Swissy into adulthood.

5) SOCIALIZE YOUR SWISSY.

Swissy personalities can vary from dog to dog within the breed. Some are naturally more friendly and outgoing while others tend to be initially wary of strange people, strange dogs and new situations. Keep in mind that the Swissy, while used extensively in its native Switzerland as a draft dog and cattle drover, was also used as an all-around farm dog. Therefore, it possesses innate tendencies toward guarding. The guarding instinct results in the Swissy's vigilant behavior, constantly on the lookout for any unfamiliarity encroaching upon its territory. Dogs do not have the capability to generalize from one situation to the next. That is why it is imperative for a responsible owner to continually socialize and expose his Swissy to a variety of new places, people and situations. With adequate socialization, a dog will learn to be more relaxed and self-confident in unfamiliar situations. Not all Swissys require the same level or amount of socialization. Some require more than others. If your Swissy continues to appear insecure or stressed in different venues, more socialization is definitely in order. An insecure and stressed Swissy is probably a fearful Swissy. A fearful Swissy can react by lunging, growling, snarling and even biting.

6) TAKE YOUR SWISSY TO PUPPY KINDERGARTEN CLASS.

An excellent way to expose your Swissy to other dogs and other people is to enroll it in a Puppy Kindergarten class. Experts in the field of canine social development have determined that the ideal age at which puppies absolutely soak up and learn from exposure to all kinds of people, places, situations, and other dogs is between the ages of 6 weeks and 14 weeks. Puppy K classes have sprung up all over the country. Most instructors allow puppies into these classes once puppies have reached 12 weeks of age and received their third set of vaccinations. There is the slight possibility of a puppy picking up a disease at a class because it is not yet fully vaccinated. However, most experts agree that the socially developmental benefits of getting the puppy into a class at the earliest possible age outweigh the precautions of waiting until the puppy is older and fully vaccinated. This is an issue you may want to discuss with your veterinarian and your breeder. Incidentally, research facilities in your area offering Puppy K classes and different levels of obedience training prior to bringing home your puppy. Don't wait until your puppy is 12 weeks old and then try to scramble to get your puppy into a class. Chances are, the classes will already be filled. Unfortunately, you'll have to wait until the next session, and you will have lost an opportunity to socialize your puppy during that critical period.

7) KEEP YOUR SWISSY OBEDIENCE TRAINED.

A common mistake made by many novice Swissy owners is to take their Swissy out of formal obedience training once it has been through a Puppy K and/or a Beginner's obedience class. Most instructors will tell you that the purpose of a Beginner's class is to train the owner how to teach the dog some basic commands. Once the Beginner's class - usually 8 weeks in duration - is over, the real work is just starting. Your Swissy has a long way to go to reach adulthood. Swissys are notorious for 'acting out' during their adolescent phase. The adolescent phase can begin as early as 5 months of age and last through at least two years of age. Thus, at a minimum, you can count on 20 months of owning a physically powerful, 100-pound plus, working breed with teenage tendencies to "do it my way." The owner's attitude must be, "I don't think so." To manage your Swissy through its adolescence, it is highly advisable to stay with your Swissy in a weekly obedience class until it is at

least two years old. You may decide that you and your Swissy have become quite a team, excelling at all exercises, and want to become involved in competitive obedience. Or, you may simply want to maintain a well-mannered Swissy in your home and community. Either way, weekly class time with your Swissy promotes 1) bonding between you and your dog, 2) necessary continued socialization and 3) the motivation to work with your dog to be prepared to shine in class. As a working breed, a Swissy is at its best when given a job to do. Swissys are intelligent. Most respond well to positive reinforcement. Therefore, working with your Swissy in obedience should not be viewed as a chore, but as an opportunity to enjoy time with your dog. A note of importance: working breeds, characteristically, do not train like other “obedience” breeds, such as Golden Retrievers or Shelties. “Obedience” breeds thrive on repetition of exercises. Conversely, working breeds become easily bored and distracted and will not willingly repeat an exercise over and over, as will a Golden Retriever. Therefore, the owner of a working breed should understand that successfully teaching commands and exercises to a Swissy will require shorter, upbeat sessions. Don’t measure your progress in comparison to the classic “obedience” breeds. Swissys are not only amusing to others, but also love amusement. Incorporating imaginative games into the daily obedience routine will help to keep them focused and challenged.

8) TEACH YOUR SWISSY TO ‘WAIT’.

This command can be invaluable in exercising control over your Swissy. Remember that your Swissy will probably weigh near or over 100 pounds. Strikingly handsome, he is also robust and powerful. After all, he is a draft dog. Swissys will bowl you over to get through a doorway, up or down stairs, or along a narrow hallway. You have a better chance of not getting pushed if your dog has been taught to obey the ‘wait’ command. Tell yourself that you are the leader. It is your right to move ahead of your Swissy. The ‘wait’ command should also be used when feeding your Swissy. It is another means of exercising control, letting your Swissy know who is boss. If you place food in front of your Swissy, giving the ‘wait’ command, he should not begin eating until you release him. He must learn to respect that he is eating only because you are allowing him to eat. Teaching the ‘wait’ command could save your Swissy’s life. When walking your Swissy on lead, teach him that he must ‘sit’ and ‘wait’ at every street curb, not moving forward until you give him the ‘heel’ command.

9) TEACH YOUR SWISSY TO ‘HEEL’.

Enough importance cannot be placed on the necessity of teaching your Swissy to walk on lead in ‘heel’ position. The Swissy’s appeal, to many, is that it is a large dog. The pitfall of having a large working breed, descended from the ancient mastiffs, is that it is powerful. Swissy puppies grow very quickly into big, muscular dogs that can behave in an unruly manner. Bred as a draft and droving dog, the Swissy is strong, to say the least. Swissys can excel at a variety of performance events, not the least of which is Weight Pulling. It is not unusual for a Swissy to be able to pull upwards of 1,000 pounds. In fact, the top weight-pulling Swissys in the country have pulled anywhere between 2,500 pounds to 4,000 pounds. Swissys are enthusiastic about pulling! Now, imagine this pulling machine at one end of a 6-foot lead, or worse, yet, a flexi-lead, with you at the other end. If your Swissy is not taught to ‘heel’, and he gets it into his head to lunge or run, you very well may be pulled to the ground. Injury to you is not out of the question, and think of the seriousness of the situation if a child is holding onto the lead.

10) TEACH YOUR SWISSY THE ‘RECALL’.

For all of their endearing qualities, Swissys can display a streak of independence at times. With some, one of the most difficult commands you will want your Swissy to learn is to come to you when called. Significantly, it is probably the most important command to ensure your dog obeys. Swissys can have a high prey drive. They are incredibly attracted to squirrels, chipmunks, and the like. When in hot pursuit of one of these creatures, they

can switch on their selective hearing and simply ignore your recall command. As mentioned, Swissys love a good game. This breed is so much fun in that respect. But sometimes, their idea of mischief can have a deadly outcome. Because Swissys are athletic, they have been known to find a way under or over fences, escaping from the safety of their yards. Some breeds have street sense, but Swissys do not. Running from the confines of the yard, away from the owner, to play “Dodge ‘Em” in traffic may seem like innocent fun to an unwitting Swissy. Teaching a reliable recall just might save your Swissy’s life.

11) TEACH YOUR SWISSY THE ‘DOWN-STAY’.

Every dog should be able to perform a ‘down-stay’. There are different methods used to teach a dog to stay in place on a ‘down’ for an extended period of time. Swissys, having that tendency towards wanting the upper hand, do not like to perform ‘downs’. Going ‘down’ means it is assuming a submissive position. This is all the more reason you will want your Swissy to obey a ‘down’ command and ‘stay’ in the ‘down’ position for up to 30 minutes. Teaching the ‘long down’, as it is referred to in obedience circles, further establishes your role as leader over your dog. In addition, if your dog is capable of obeying the ‘down-stay’, you virtually can take your dog anywhere, knowing he can behave in an acceptable manner. And, finally, a dog that is capable of dropping to a ‘down’ on command, and staying, may save his own life. Take the example of the willful dog that is running for the street, refusing to come when called. That same dog might perform a drop to ‘down’ on command, just stopping short of running into traffic.

12) BE CONSISTENT.

Successfully training a dog to behave the way you want it to requires consistency. First and foremost, a united front involving all family members is a must. All family members should agree with and follow through in the consistency of training and the giving of commands. If Dad does not allow the Swissy on the furniture, but Mom does, just how confused do you think your new 4-legged family member will be? If the Swissy jumps on the bed, Dad can’t blame the dog. Thus, everyone should determine mutually acceptable boundaries for the dog’s behavior and agree to move forward with those parameters in mind when training. Children can be coached to maintain the parameters, as well. Secondly, consistency in the actual command is a necessity. If Dad is saying “Off!” to tell the Swissy to remove himself from the couch, but Mom is using the word “Down,” the result is a confused dog. Consistency garners respect.

13) MAKE A COMMAND SOUND LIKE A COMMAND.

The instructions ‘sit’, ‘down’, and ‘stay’ are considered “static” commands. Speak them in a lower tone of voice. The instructions ‘come’ or ‘heel’ should be said in a happier tone of voice because you are motivating your dog to move. Verbal corrections, such as the popular “aaah – aaah” should be voiced in a guttural tone. An appropriate “No!” or “Off!” or “Enough!” should be voiced sharply. Conversely, your dog should hear all praise words in happy, enthusiastic, loving tones. Dogs are quick to pick up on what is agreeable and disagreeable to their owners, as long as their owners speak in distinguishable tones. A note of caution is in order if you don’t appreciate a big bark on a dog. The Swissy may not be for you. The Swissy bark is loud and can be quite intimidating. Swissys are notorious alarm barkers. Although they don’t bark incessantly, they will bark at anything out of the ordinary in or surrounding your home. In fact, they will want to bark at your neighbors every time your neighbors walk outside. They will bark at you every time you pull in the driveway. Teaching your Swissy to obey the command “Enough!” will come in handy if you want your Swissy to discontinue his alarm barking.

14) BE REALISTIC.

Don't give your dog a command unless you can follow through with enforcing the command. Don't put your Swissy on a 'down-stay' while you are bustling from room to room, busy with household chores. Chances are your Swissy won't stay because Swissys love to follow their people from room to room. They thrive on human companionship. If you put your Swissy on a 'down-stay' in the living room, but find you need to fold laundry in another room, you will not be able to enforce the command. How can your dog be expected to obey if you are not consistently realistic in your follow-through? By the way, if you are a person who does not like your household pet to be underfoot, a Swissy is not for you. Another very important example regarding realistic expectations is to not give your dog a command to 'come' unless you can make him come. A dog will quickly pick up on the fact that it does not have to come to you if you are not within a distance to enforce the command. Never give a recall unless you are prepared to go after your dog and, with praise, bring it back to the spot where you originally uttered the command.

15) PRACTICE THE 3 P'S – PATIENCE, PERSISTENCE AND PRAISE.

In other words, be patiently persistent and use praise! At times, training your Swissy will seem like a hair-pulling experience. If you are on your last nerve, don't work with your Swissy at that time. You certainly will not be capable of patience. Swissys are incredibly sensitive to their people's moods, almost certainly aware of them before you are! Their concern for you is genuine. If they sense you are sad, stressed, or tired, their response in training will mirror your mood. As discussed, Swissys often do not train in the traditional sense of many other "obedience" breeds. Don't give up on your Swissy. He will get there! Sometimes it may just take a little more creative persistence on your part, but think of the fun involved in the challenge. It can be necessary to use appropriate physical corrections on some Swissys via the use of training collars or Gentle Leaders. Instruction from an experienced and capable trainer in the use of a variety of collars and their intended corrections is absolutely necessary before you attempt to use any training collar on your Swissy. Without a doubt, training collars should NEVER be used on a Swissy until it has reached at least 4 months of age. Swissys, generally speaking, respond well to positive reinforcement. If you start, from the very first day that you bring home your Swissy puppy, to reward with enthusiastic praise, food, game playing, and physical affection, the odds are you will have a responsive Swissy. There are always exceptions. Keep in mind that any correction, physical or verbal, must be delivered swiftly and without anger. It should be followed with praise in the absence of bad behavior. The absence of bad behavior should be rewarded. Timing of corrections and praise is key to shaping wanted behavior in your Swissy. It is NOT appropriate to strike your Swissy.

16) LET YOUR SWISSY EARN HIS KEEP.

No one gets a free lunch, including your Swissy. Make your Swissy work to get his meal, a treat, affection, or a spot on the couch next to you. As discussed, make your Swissy 'sit' and 'wait' before you release him to eat his kibble. Swissys can be food aggressive and inclined to guard their food bowls. You may have to teach your Swissy to accept having your hand in or near your bowl without your Swissy displaying any form of aggression. He should not view you, the 'hand that feeds him', as a threat. The moment your Swissy comes home with you, practice having your hand in the bowl or near the bowl. Praise his tolerance of your close proximity to his food, whether you are placing the food, playing with the food, or removing the food. A word of caution. Do not overdo your training in this area. You should keep your hand in his food bowl no longer than five seconds, and don't play with his food at every meal. Continue the training until it is apparent that your Swissy is not bothered by your close proximity to the bowl. Biscuits or other types of treats should not be doled out indiscriminately. If you want to give your Swissy a treat, make him perform an obedience exercise like 'sit' or 'down'. The same goes for indiscriminate stroking and petting of your Swissy. Most Swissys love affection, but any dog can become too used to constant petting and begin to think it is his right. It is not. You are the pack leader, and you determine when you want to give affection to your Swissy. Please do not reward bad behavior with petting or

soothing “It’s OK” or “There, there” utterances. And, absolutely, if you desire to allow your Swissy access to the couch or bed, he must know that it is a privilege and not his right to occupy space on the furniture. If, when you command your Swissy to remove himself from the furniture, he challenges you in anyway, you have a problem. As Swissys have a tendency to “push the envelope,” you must continually assert your dominance over your Swissy to have a well-mannered, obedient and respectful canine companion.

17) BE YOUR SWISSY’S PACK LEADER.

It is well documented that canines are a pack animal, and this is especially so for Swissys. At one point in history, they ran in packs in the Swiss Alps. It is inherent in canine hierarchy to require a pack leader. If one of the dogs in the pack does not appoint himself as pack leader, another dog will assume that role of dominance. Swissy temperaments cover a spectrum. Some are more docile and submissive than others, but upon close observation, they are all capable of exhibiting dominant behaviors. Some are subtle, but others don’t give a fig about subtlety. Some are downright bullies, if allowed to be. From your Swissy’s point of view, his human family is his pack. He wants to be able to look up to a leader. If the humans in the family (this goes for the children, too) do not assert their dominance and take on the role of pack leader, the Swissy has no choice, due to his nature, but to assume that role. Actually, your Swissy feels more comfortable being in a submissive (omega) position, rather than in a dominant (alpha) position. In an omega position, he doesn’t have to assume responsibility for the pack. We all know that fewer responsibilities usually result in a feeling of relaxation, less stress. Do your Swissy a favor and be his pack leader. Show him he does not have to worry, that he can rely on your self-confidence. You will have a happier and healthier dog.

18) TEACH YOUR SWISSY TO PLAY NICELY.

You may be considering adding a Swissy to a household in which another, older dog already has its established home. Considering a Swissy’s tendency towards asserting dominance, do not be surprised if a Swissy puppy attempts to climb the canine social ladder. Your older dog may be capable of putting the new puppy ‘in its place’, retaining its pack leader position. In that instance, harmony will most probably reign. However, your older dog may be somewhat omega and have difficulty in knowing how to handle a pushy puppy. Should this set of circumstances occur, realize that your puppy has just climbed its first rung of the pack ladder. Having scented the sweet smell of success, your puppy could be well on its way to the top of the ladder, if you do not prevent him from getting there. It is OK to allow dogs to jockey for position and work out their differences, as long as the communication does not become a full-blown skirmish. Non-violent discussions in a multi-dog household are to be expected. However, disagreements that escalate into bloodletting are entirely unacceptable and downright dangerous, not only to the dogs, but also to the human members of the family. You must establish yourself as the ultimate and supreme pack leader. The dogs must defer to your demand for peace within the pack.

19) WORK THAT BODY!

Although care should be taken not to force exercise a puppy during its formative months, once a sound Swissy reaches 18 months to two years of age, the fun begins. You are the owner of a special canine companion. Not all breeds are as versatile as the Swissy. This breed has a sense of adventure, rallying to new experiences. Swissys are very expressive. Watching the sheer joy on your Swissy’s face as he participates in performance endeavors with you will put a smile on your face and in your heart. What can Swissys do? Just about anything you ask of them. They excel at obedience, drafting (pulling a cart), weight pulling, herding, packing, Search and Rescue, and Therapy work. Yet, none of this comes easily, and extensive training is necessary to get your Swissy to work successfully in any of these areas. The ‘getting there’ is part of the fun. As a working breed, a Swissy is

happiest when he has a job to do. He enjoys physical as well as mental stimulation. Truly, both are essential to his well being. Although some fanciers have referred to Swissys as couch potatoes, they really are not. A well-exercised Swissy is content to lie calmly for a couple of hours. But, at the end of a rest period, he is ready for more entertainment and stimulation. Because of the many ways in which you and your Swissy can enjoy each other's company, it is not difficult to choose one or more activities to keep him in shape, physically and mentally. Remember, a tired dog is a good dog.

20) LEARN A NEW LANGUAGE.

Do you know dog speak? It's not always verbal. Although Swissys are talkers, body language is the primary way in which dogs communicate. To provide a bonding relationship with your Swissy, you'll need to learn his language. Before you bring home a puppy, educate yourself to read canine body language. If you don't know what your dog is trying to tell you, how will you ever successfully communicate and make a cohesive bond with your new family member? For instance, don't interpret all tail wagging as an expression of inviting approach. A tail positioned high in the air and waving slowly is an indicator of just the opposite. Learn to read what the positions of dogs' ears are saying. Swissys are known for their infectious smile, but a dog's lips plastered back from his teeth signals an act of impending aggression. Once you see this threatening grimace, it might be too late. You might have missed the initial warning, a wrinkled or curled lip not unlike a sneer. As mentioned, Swissys are incredibly expressive. They will tell you what they are thinking and feeling, but you must be a responsible owner, knowing how to read the signs. If you understand his language, including all of the subtleties, you can anticipate his behavior. If you can anticipate, you can either prevent or stop bad behavior before it gets out of control.

21) MAKE YOUR SWISSY A MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY.

Ask yourself why you want a dog and what kind of lifestyle you enjoy. If you don't want a dog to actually occupy space inside your home, the Swissy is definitely not for you. Swissys want to be with their families. Pack-oriented dogs, Swissys emotionally thrive on being with their people. Relegating a Swissy to the back yard 7 and 24 just won't work. Swissys have a joie de vivre unlike many other breeds. They want to live life to the fullest. Their exuberance and cheerfulness is infectious. It is so much a part of why it has been said, "Swissy's are like Lay's Potato Chips – you can't have just one." As enticing as that sounds, take a moment, or longer, to honestly assess your own temperament and personality. Do you have the confidence and self-esteem to exhibit dominance over a powerful dog with willful tendencies? If not, then don't bring home a Swissy puppy. In all likelihood, you will not be able to make a commitment for the life of the dog and you'll find yourself returning your Swissy to the breeder, or worse yet, placing it in rescue. There is no shame in admitting that a certain breed of dog is not a good match for you and your family. If we all owned the same breed of dog? Well, just remember that it takes all breeds to make the world go 'round. If you decide that you are a strong-willed person with the desire to spend extensive time and money training and socializing your Swissy, don't expect the road to adulthood to be an easy one. The hurdles along the way may, at times, seem daunting. If you stay the course, the rewards you reap from sharing your home with a fiercely loving Greater Swiss Mountain Dog are immeasurable.