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Introduction on dog behavior

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1. A dog is a dog is a wolf

For understanding dog behavior it is very helpful to look at the dog's ancestors, the wolves, how they behave and interact and how their behavior develops. Because, despite of centuries and centuries of domestication, not much has changed in the physical as well as in the mental genetics of dogs compared with them. In other words, *the behavior of dogs is still quite similar to that of the wolf* and not to that of human beings.

2. Behavior development

A dog's behavior is influenced for approximately 40% by its genes. And genes affects how the brain works, which in turn affects the production of hormones. In other words, breeding has an important effect on the behavior of the off-spring as several physical and character traits are hereditary. The hormonal influence on a dog's mind is quite interesting as hormones and behavior are interdependent. So have hormones influence on behavior and, vice versa, behavior has influence on the production of hormones. This is called technically: biofeedback. For example, dogs that as pup have been exposed on a regular basis to all sorts of stimuli will grow up to be bigger animals with bigger brains and will cope better when placed in unfamiliar or unexpected situations. When confronted these animals will not fight, freeze or flee but instead they will investigate and examine their surroundings. They behave like this because of the biofeedback that is influenced by early experience.

The other 60% stands for the role the environment plays on the development of the dog's behavior: that is what the dog learns during its life from its mother, its littermates, other dogs and animals, environments other than where it lives and us.

3. Communication

Thus, dogs descend from wolves. For their survival wolves live in groups, named packs. In order to live in harmony and to work together during hunt, wolves are very social animals (just like we, humans). They live according a pecking order of dominance and sub-mission, in which each individual will strictly follow certain rules. However, this pecking order is not static. Through continues displays of certain colloquial ceremonies each individual reconfirms time after time their place within this pecking order and will act accordingly. In other words, by means of a sophisticated system of mostly mute signaling and communication wolves' make each other understand what their exact place is within the hierarchical structure of their pack.

Wolves communicate mainly by means of scent, body language and mimics and, of lesser importance, by sound. Many people tend to treat their dog as a small human being, where democracy rules. Communication is mainly through words and the dog needs to adapt to the human society with all her unspoken rules. However, we have just learned that dogs 'think wolf' and 'act wolf'. Dogs do not communicate by means of a verbal language. And, contrary to the general believe that dogs understand exactly what we think feel and say, dogs never will be able to understand the human language. Teaching a dog some commands does not make him understand whole sentences or, even, whole stories that we tend to tell our dogs. Plus, that often human's verbal and non-verbal communication speak two different languages. The words telling the dog one thing, while the body-language says another thing. As dogs are primarily non-verbal communicators, they are excellent in reading body language and will (re)act accordingly, which is not always that what the owner had in mind.

Luckily, the dogs' communication system is easily learned and understood by us, humans. After all, we humans are gifted with our intelligence.

4. Basic needs

Just as for us humans, a dog's basic needs are: water, food, shelter, space, air, sunlight and attention. As said before, dogs are social animals and therefore need companionship. Whether this is in the form of another dog or a human being does not really matter to the dog. Although for developing proper communication— and playing-skills, bite inhibition and to understand it is a dog dogs always need to interact with other dogs on a regular basis, from a very young age on.

For their sense of survival and security dogs, again similar to human beings, need leadership and a clear hierarchical structure. In other words, they need to know exactly their place within the family household that may include, besides other animals, everybody belonging to that household: (grand) father, (grand) mother, children, other family members, live-in friends, and also the servants. Equal ranks do not exist in the dog's mind. The lowest of ALL members of the household should be the dog(s).

When (one of) the dog's basic needs is not met, it will influence the dog physically or mentally and, as a result, it influences its behavior.

5. Basic care

For staying in optimum health humans need to perform certain basic care rituals. Dogs need similar care, that is: a) coat- and skin- care (grooming, bath, and check for irregularities on the skin such as wounds, pimples, fleas, ticks, etc.), b) general health check; eyes, ears, nose, teeth, feet and nails, feces (internal parasites = worms), c) vaccination, d) exercise.

When this basic care is insufficiently met, as a result the dog may carry a disease of which some are contagious to humans. Dogs that do not feel well may show this in lethargy, but also in aggression such as growling, snapping or even a bite. Especially when there is pain involved, dogs tend to communicate this by warnings: first they may try to walk away, or pull back their paw. If this is not understood, they may growl or gently take your hand in their mouth. When still not understood a dog may use snapping as a way to communicate they are in pain and scared. Further, performing basic care is another way to reconfirm the rank system between owner and dog. Therefore, also basic care influences the way a dog behaves.

6. Learning process

Dogs learn through observing and copying, trial and error, and through training. When a certain action brings reward the pup often will try it again. When it brings punishment the certain action will be stopped, provided that the punishment is also received as punishment by the dog or the opposite may happen, the behavior increases instead of decreases.

The learning process starts from the moment the puppy sets foot on this earth. Of course, first it only learns, among a few other things, where to get the milk and how to feel warm and safe.

But once the puppy can see, hear and walk an extremely important period starts, which is called the socialization period and runs basically from 3 to 14 weeks of age. The importance of this period is due to the fact that it lays the basis for the behavior of the dog. In other words: *the basis of a mentally healthy dog is laid before it reaches roughly the age of 3 1/2 months ONLY!*

It is in this period, mainly through play that hunting skills are developed. The puppy learns how to maintain its balance, how to intercept and intervene, how to get a good timing. Play permits experimentation under safe conditions. It stimulates coordination and promotes skillfulness and mental flexibility, stimulates inventiveness and teaches problem solving. Further, the puppy develops its social skills: communication, displays of dominance, submission, calming signals, play signals, interaction with other dogs, animals and human beings, etc. Play activities are good indicators for which dogs are dominant and which submissive. Dogs (young and older) use play to establish their social status, i.e. their place within the hierarchical structure of the household. Therefore, for a good interaction between human and dog, also the human need to follow certain rules while playing with their dog.

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