

CANINE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

A great deal has been written and said, in popular books, magazines and on television about how dogs are genetically linked to the wolf. Out of this knowledge, a popular ideology has emerged where dogs are assumed to live together in a manner which mimics that of their wolf ancestry, i.e. there is a clearly defined hierarchy consisting of a TOP DOG who equals the pack leader, followed by a middle ranking dog, and then down to the bottom of the pile where we meet the underdog. According to many, this system is fixed and inflexible, and if you are not careful your dog will already be hatching its plan to take over your household and rule you with an iron set of teeth!

If you follow the advice of some of these so-called "behaviourists" you will need to abide by certain rules, which are designed to protect you and your family from the possibility of this doggy coupe. The rules are as follows:

1. Do not allow your dog to eat its meal until you (the top dog) have eaten first.
2. Do not allow your dog to leave the house (den) before you (top dog) have passed through the doorway first.
3. Do not allow your dog to climb on the settee or bed (only top dogs are allowed to rest in the cosiest places).
4. Do not allow your dog to climb your stairs, or to peer at you from the top of the staircase.
5. Do not allow your dog to peer into your eyes.
6. Do not cuddle your dog
7. Do not stroke your dog
8. Do not interact with your dog unless you are doing some kind of training
9. Do not greet your dog when you come home from work, or from the shops etc.
10. Do not greet your dog first thing in the morning; it should be the one to greet you.

These Ten Commandments (they say) are to protect you from sending the dog the wrong message, therefore protecting you from this potential control freak of an animal who only has one thing on its mind, at any given situation, and that is to CONTROL YOU!

I often wonder how dogs have managed to survive alongside human being without all these rules and regulations! It is this type of nonsense that has given behaviour specialists a bad name in many quarters. What's more, most of this advice is quite unnecessary, and with some dogs, it has actually been the cause of behaviour problems, e.g., by crushing their individuality!

To understand where these beliefs originally stem from, you only have to open up a few old philosophy books, and you will see there is a clear school of thought: animals are different from us, they do not think, feel, show emotion, have personality, reveal creativity, have individuality, and they are totally incapable of working things out. They are merely stimulus/response robots that are at the mercy of the environment in which they exist.

So there you are folks, any illusions you were under that your dog loves you is wrong! How do we know this ... because "the scientists tell us so", or that is what many are led to believe. But whose science? And what is their agenda? I suggest it makes a few people feel better about some of the experiments they like to carry out on animals, after all it does not matter what you do if the animal cannot show pain!

However, other scientists have another point of view, and I count myself amongst those, who believe that dogs are sentient beings who are capable of making decisions, reviewing situations and learning for themselves as and when they are faced with new experiences. So bearing this in mind, if you happen to hear someone repeating draconian rules on popular television programmes, or read about this in certain doggy magazines, it does not make their views valid. Unfortunately most television researchers do not check out the qualifications of their contributors and many of these "behaviourists" are in fact veterinary surgeons, or dog lovers who are only repeating what they have read in popular dog psychology books, most of which have been written by people who are themselves book taught. Believe it or not, some of these people have never even owned a dog!

If I were to ask you to describe a dominant dog the chances are that you would describe the following: "aggressive, assertive and extremely disobedient". This is the common misperception. In reality a dominant dog (if this is what it must be labelled) is a natural leader, he or she is confident, kind, fair and very effective. This is why they are 'leaders'. Those who fight and bicker among themselves are far too preoccupied with their own petty power struggles, fears and anxieties to be able to lead anybody anywhere. Over the years the word 'dominant' has taken on negative connotations and is quite often used as a cop-out to describe dogs who are merely out of control, lack sufficient training, under socialized (therefore under confident), or extremely fearful. Some are aggressive because of medical problems that have gone undiagnosed.

Therefore to suggest that humans take on the role of "Top Wolf" is a rather upside down, and potentially dangerous way of viewing the canine/human relationship. It also puts a subconscious message into your mind that any unacceptable behaviour should be met by confrontation. This places adults and children at risk of entering into a power struggle with the dog, where all kinds of emotional responses can erupt, and this is where things can become pretty dangerous. Please don't despair. There are far safer and more harmonic methods for establishing a kind, firm and yet fair relationship with your dog and that is by treating the dog as you would a member of the family .

... Having said this: over the years I have come to realize that many people believe they already treat their dogs like children - but do they? When I am working with a problem dog, I am often told by their human companions "we treat Rascal just like we do the kids", but in reality the scenario often goes something like this:

Child enters the kitchen whilst mum is cooking the evening meal. .. "Mum, mum, MUM"

"What?"

"I want you to help me build a mud pie in the sitting room"

"Not now my dear, I am BUSY cooking dinner"

"Mum, I WANT you to help me RIGHT NOW".

"Oh do you now, then that's just tough luck, you'll have to wait until I've finished, now go and watch the telly or talk to your chat room friend Melanie in Canada on the Internet - GO NOW!

When dealing with children, not many of us drop whatever it is we are doing in order to give into our little darlings' demands. No, we wait until we have finished what it is we are doing and then, and IF convenient, we might just sit down and play a game. If not, we generally involve ourselves in other activities.

However, in comes Rascal the lollopy Labrador ... Huh, huh, wriggle, wriggle, slobber, "oi you, fuss me, fuss me, fuss me RIGHT NOW!"

"Ooooh, Rascal, have you come to love your mummy and daddy then (cuddle stroke) that's a goooood boy, come give us a kiss then, aaaaaaaahh, thank you".

I have seen similar scenario's to this repeated in so many homes, with so called "problem dogs". The child is told "no later", but the dog gets whatever it wants, and whenever it demands it.

Dogs are also allowed to follow humans all over the house at the slightest sign of movement. If a child were to do this, you would soon get fed up and start worrying that the child may be suffering from some kind of anxiety problem, especially if it started following you to the bathroom. However, this behaviour appears acceptable for the dog. But it is not. A clingy dog, more often than not, becomes the type of dog who will trash the house, or bark and howl in despair every time its human companions disappear from view. This is a relationship based upon dependency, a form of addiction, as opposed to the dog loving you so much that it has got to be with you at all costs.

So please try to ensure that you do treat your dog like a child. Make yourself less available to your dog's demands. I am not saying that you shouldn't show love and affection to your dog, or play with it on a regular basis, just that you might consider showing your affections when the time is right, and that is on your terms and conditions and not just when your dog demands. Dogs have far more intelligence than we credit them with, and they are quite capable of learning to handle disappointments from time to time. In other words **DON'T LET YOUR DOG WALK ALL OVER YOU** - the consequences being that it will become like a spoilt brat - uncontrollable, both inside and outside the home, and perhaps even aggressive towards you. This type of behaviour is not dominance, it is just the dog running riot - out of control!

So what happens when you try to tell your dog that you are busy? Generally they come back and try even harder to gain your attention. Pushing them away does not work, it only adds to the fun. Shouting at them has exactly the same effect. So how do you handle a pushy and demanding dog (of whatever size)?

Firstly, if the dog is thrusting toys into your lap, collect the toys up and place them into a box, out of the dogs reach. If the dog starts jumping all over you, or digging its claws into your legs, get up (without pushing the dog or making eye contact) and move away, perhaps closing a door between you. The key to success is to ensure that all demanding and uninvited behaviour is ignored. Try not to speak to the dog, look at it or touch it, just pretend that it does not exist. Quite often many people give in at this point, and this is when the dog learns an extremely valuable lesson - if you keep on and on - eventually these humans cave in. If this level of learning occurs then it goes in at a very deep level - and for reasons I shall not bore you with - so please be very careful.

If the dog is pestering you to distraction and fails to respond to your ignoring it, then I suggest that you take control of the situation by attaching a lead to the dog (again without speaking or making eye contact), and then running the lead under your feet, thereby creating a restraint. If the dog throws a tantrum, which it probably will, then allow the tantrum to run its course. Eventually when the dog settles down for a few minutes, praise, and reward it with all of your attentions, e.g. "good dog, settle down, that's what makes me happy". Alternatively put the dog into another room until it calms down.

You will often find that puppy dogs become very demanding when they become over stimulated or over tired. Should this be the case, the puppy should fall asleep very quickly once it has been restrained, or put to bed. Someone who attended one of my previous puppy groups had the bright idea of tying the puppy to the post at the bottom of the stairs (which were in the sitting room) when the pup became too demanding. She then ignored it until it calmed down. This method proved very successful, so much so that all the owners have to do now is tell the dog to settle down and away she goes.

Please remember, when your dog is behaving well, praise and reward it for doing so. Tell the dog what it is doing e.g. "settle down, there's a good dog" thereby giving the dog good clear signals as to when you are pleased. This is far more effective than constantly nagging at the dog when things are going wrong. If you are constantly nagging and never praising and naming the correct behaviour, how is the dog ever going to understand when it is getting something right? Think about this because it helps with kids too.

One additional point to note: puppies between the ages of four and five months will be teething, and this can result in some turning into whirling dervishes, particularly during the evening. If you suspect teething is behind such behaviour, just watch what happens when the offending tooth pops out - you generally find the puppy settles down and goes to sleep.