

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ADOPTED DOG.....A DOG WITH A PAST

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Many people bring a pup/dog into their homes who have had previous life experiences. They may have lived with another family, pack, or had to fend for themselves as a stray. The life this pup/dog lived before coming to your family has a major impact on the mental, emotional, and sometimes physical dog you find yourself facing. Consequently, it is important to understand 'why' they exhibit certain behaviors and 'how' to deal with these behaviors. You may never know the specifics of these dogs' previous lives, but if you are observant you can make some valid assumptions. Note that even if you take in a dog from an individual, the information they provide may not be complete or accurate. This may be deliberate OR the previous owners may truly not have a clue about what really went on with their dog as it impacted the ultimate development of the dog. Even owners who try to provide a complete picture may not have a clear perception of what was happening. Therefore, I recommend that you take any information provided, take it under advisement, and file it away. But, rely on your OWN observations for a true assessment and decisions on how to handle the new dog.



The process of working a dog through their mental, emotional, and physical issues/ baggage does not happen overnight. It takes much work and often, much time. But, they seem to put their hearts 'back on the line' easier than people. Even when they have opened their hearts to you, they will still have habits, patterns, reflexes, 'triggers' to things that are reminiscent of their previous life for a period of time. What I mean is, they can fully accept you, their new life, and be so very grateful for the wonderful life they now have....and yet, still have their 'triggers' that can be set off inadvertently by you or their environment. Please know that even these 'triggers' can eventually fall by the wayside/extinguish themselves. What we have to do is to help the dog separate themselves from these reactions and reflexes...while at the same time, building a new set of reactions, reflexes, and behaviors.

It is up to us to understand the mental and emotional processes of the instinctual nature of the dog. We must know that the family we bring the dog into constitutes a 'new pack' with new rules, structure, and hierarchy. Initially, the dog only knows how to interact and react by the rules of their previous pack. They will make many mistakes by the new pack rules. They will exhibit reactions that are inappropriate within the new 'pack' dynamics, even though these same behaviors had been crucial for survival in their previous pack. Do we banish the 'new dog' or do we take the time, patience, and insight to acclimate the new dog to OUR pack dynamics. Many experts will tell us NOT to anthropomorphize the dogs' behaviors....put too much of a human element to them. I agree and I disagree. What I mean is, the dogs have emotional reactions that are much more similar to human emotions and reactions than many experts accept. They feel and react much like we do in many situations. The 'gap' in understanding this is that while the dogs experience many of the same emotions we humans do, they are relegated to REACTING in the only ways dogs have at their disposal to communicate in given situations. The dogs have only their voices (growls), their body language, & ultimately...if pushed too far, they can slap out by snapping or biting. The dogs SAY/COMMUNICATE the very same things we do. The difference is their mode of communication and our perceptions of and reactions to their 'dog speak' communicators.



When dogs are repeatedly exposed to specific reactive situations, they learn to 'communicate', to respond with conditioned behaviors. It is up to us to modify their behaviors, their communications. This does not happen overnight, because these behaviors have become habits & patterns. These behaviors have become what the dog believes is needed, required to survive. Reconditioning these habits/patterns is no different than with people. It takes time, patience, and consistency. You have to be the 'alpha' and be in complete control of their food which translates in dogspeak to you determining their survival. This leads us to a discussion of the ALPHA (pack leader) role. All pups start out mouthy. This is normal dog/dog behavior. When in a dog/dog pack, the older dogs in the pack teach the youngsters 'bite inhibition' and appropriate use of their mouths as governed by that particular pack's rules. These rules are determined by the 'alpha/lead' dog of that pack. When we bring pups into our people/dog pack, we MUST assume the role of 'alpha'. This means setting the pack rules, teaching bite inhibition, puppy manners, appropriate inter-pack behaviors. If we DO NOT provide this guidance, the results will be governed by the basic nature of the dogs. The pups will grow up using their mouths as they always have. The mouthiness of a 12 week old pup may seem inconsequential. However, this very same puppy mouthiness exhibited by a one year old dog is significantly different. If we DO NOT assume the 'alpha' role and set rules, guidelines, and pack structure, the pup will eventually assume this role. When they do this, the dogs are just following their basic instincts which tell them that 'every' pack must have an alpha/ pack leader. If one is not in place, the maturing pup will be driven to assume this role themselves. Their instincts tell them that for their 'pack' to survive, there must be a leader. You must assume the alpha/lead role in every way or the dog will assume the door is open for them to 'retain or reclaim' the alpha role they have always known. If a dog has been kicked, hit, mauled, yanked, strung up by their leash, etc., they will likely have developed reactions that 'warn back' the offensive stimulus and protect the dogs from what they perceive as 'threatening' situations. In these instances, the dogs have to be handled with all due compassion to prove to them and help them understand they can 'trust' humans to not always inflict harm, pain, and injury.

When a dog has lived in an aggressive environment and consequently, have learned to react in a reflexive 'self protective/survival' manner, IF you attempt to deal with their reactions/behaviors in an aggressive manner...you are only VALIDATING their reactions. Many people perceive a dog's seemingly aggressive behaviors as needing to be dealt with in a like manner. Meaning, the people react themselves with... 'that is not acceptable, I must teach this dog WHO is boss!'. This is absolutely the reverse of what this type dog needs. Remember the saying, 'aggression breeds aggression'!!!! Therefore, reacting to a dog in a manner reflective of their reactions will only serve to INCITE and INFUSE the very behavior you are wanting to stop. When dogs react with behaviors we see as aggressive, they are in a highly reactive, highly stimulated, and over-adrenalized state. Therefore, if you respond to them in an aggressive manner....YOU are throwing gasoline on a fire. You will want to respond in a reverse manner, in a way the 'diffuses' the situation. Don't FUEL the flames!!! Talk the dog down!!! Be calm, cool, collected. Be in

charge...but, not threatening. Be compassionate... but, not harsh. Be firm and stern....but, understanding. All of these will serve you well. Think 'dog speak'!!! Don't threaten them, don't yell at them, don't 'posture' yourself in a threatening way (yelling at them, hands on hips, leaning over them, getting in their face, roughly grabbing at them, etc). Understand when the dog is 'triggered' into this mode and you respond in inappropriate ways, you will only INFUSE, FEED the situation. When you do this, the only possible result is that the situation is guaranteed to escalate the dog's reaction processes!!!



Moreover, what you want to do is to examine closely the situation(s) that 'set the dog off'. Determine the stimulus or trigger that elicited this reaction in the dog. Once you have a grasp of what triggers the dog, you will want to AVOID triggering the reactions, setting off those behavioral mechanisms. This is NOT 'giving in' to unacceptable behaviors. Rather, this keeps the dogs from experiencing/reinforcing the very reactions and behaviors you want to extinguish/remove from the dog. Note that every time the dog experiences/revisits these types of reactions and behaviors, this is reinforcing these very reactions and behaviors. The longer a dog can be prevented from experiencing these behaviors.....the further removed the dog will be from those reactions and behaviors..

One of the fundamental aspects of 'operant conditioning' is: any behavior that is NOT reinforced, positively or negatively, WILL be extinguished! And, this is exactly what we want. There is another crucial aspect to this process. We must help the dog develop more appropriate pack manners and behaviors as relate to their 'new' pack structure & rules. We must help the dog develop NEW coping skills & acceptable behaviors to replace the old behaviors we are extinguishing. The dogs need to learn they can live and interact with their new pack, but they must learn HOW to do this. The key here is to make the new pack rules, the new behaviors really great and rewarding for them. Take something as simple as the leash. The dog may have horrible memories from their experiences with a leash. You would NOT want to force the leash on them, because they have established/conditioned reactions to a leash...FEAR...PAIN...SURVIVAL. Therefore, you would want to 'desensitize' the dog to the leash. Let them get used to the fact that the leash does NOT signal fear, pain, a bad situation about to happen!! Then work to make their experience with the leash very rewarding and even, FUN. Recondition them to recognize the leash means a 'great' thing is about to happen!!!! If possible, make a game out of the leash. All dogs love games.

The same concept applies to many different behavioral scenarios. Think about a dog that has been kicked repeatedly. They will have horrific reactions to ANY feet or shoes. This reaction may be cratering/cowering. OR, their reaction may be to 'attack' ANY feet, any shoes, 'before' those feet and shoes can inflict pain, harm, & injury! You would go slow and desensitize the dog to ALL feet and shoes. You can desensitize the behaviors by sitting on the floor or in a chair and feed the dog between your feet. Any treats given during the day, put your hand with the treat between your feet. This allows the dog to have GREAT experiences when around feet and shoes. Remember 'food' is basic and essential to survival. Therefore, they will eventually associate feet and shoes with something that is so important to their being. After you have successfully gotten the dog to readily eat when in the presence of feet and shoes, you can take it a step further. You can make a game of being around feet and shoes. Teach the dog to do a movement in and around the feet (like a figure 8), a weaving in and out of the legs. This allows the dog to associate feet and shoes not only with the basic essential of life (food), but also they will come to associate feet and shoes with a game, with fun, with rewarding behaviors.



All 'desensitizing' processes take time and a lot of patience. Think about if you had a bad injury to your arm. Many months after the injury has healed, you will still 'flinch' if someone comes close to the arm or makes a move toward your arm. However, if you were desensitized to movement toward your arm....and, maybe given a piece of chocolate or a dollar bill everytime some one moved toward the arm....you would be desensitized and reconditioned to a different reflex much faster. The reason is there was a NEW, REWARDING stimulus occurring that replaces the behavioral reflex you were experiencing previously!!! This process requires tremendous patience, understanding, insight, and creativity to find ways to teach NEW, FUN, REWARDING behaviors. When faced with an aberrant behavior from the dog, try to look at it from the dog's perspective. Consider what may have happened previously & how they are relating that experience to what is happening now. When you can view a situation through their eyes, you will find the solution. You cannot find the solution to any problem in life, without first understanding the reason/catalyst/trigger behind the problem. Knowledge is power. When you have insight into a behavioral reaction, you will be able to find an offsetting solution. You may never truly know what caused a particular behavior or reaction in the dog, but your understanding of the behavior as it has manifested itself in the dog will provide the answers...the solutions.



While the dogs adapt phenomenally to the human/dog world, they are innately governed by the instinctual nature of being a dog. They have far more advanced thought processes than many people give them credit for. However, they are not capable of 'deductive reasoning'. The dogs are unencumbered by these analyzations. Rather, they are governed by the basic 'cause and effect' process. All they want is to live, to love, to please, to be loved, to be an accepted and viable member of their pack. If they do something we perceive as 'getting back at us or being stubborn', this is NOT what is happening! They are being true to their emotions. And, the basis of those emotions is to love you & to be allowed to stay in their pack. Therefore, you must examine the dog's behavior and reactions to determine the 'cause & effect' process that triggers those reactions and behaviors. If we look and listen, it is easy to see their cause and effect reactions.

(This article has been edited to fit on two pages. For the full article and many others, go to www.thedogspeaks.com.)

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