

DOG BEHAVIOR

The Alpha Fallacy

It is popularly held that rank is established and maintained by physical strength and dominance and that the more dominant (i.e., higher ranking) dogs are more aggressive. Hence, dogs that frequently threaten, growl, fight and bite are often assumed to be “alpha” animals. Not so Joe! The above assumptions are quite awry. Not only do they betray a theoretically simplistic view of a most sophisticated social structure but also, such notions tend to be counterproductive, inhumane and dangerous when cavalierly extrapolated to dog training, or the treatment of behavior problems.

In reality, a growly, macho topdog is a rare find. Topdogs seldom growl — they don't need to. A true topdog is usually a pretty cool customer, who is secure and confident of his (or her) privileged position and has no need to fluster and bluster to bolster up his rank. Moreover a true topdog is more likely to share a toy, a bone, or a sleeping place, than fight over one. On the other hand, bottom-ranking dogs rarely growl either. The prime directive of a low ranking individual is to maintain a low profile. Barking, growling and snarling only draw unwanted attention and if it came to a fight, the underdog would most certainly lose.

A topdog has little need to threaten and an underdog would be crazy to. Without a doubt excessive growling and repeated fighting are indicative of an underlying insecurity and uncertainty about social rank *vis a vis* other dogs. Protracted, blustery displays of aggressiveness are the hallmark of middle-ranking males.

Subordination Hierarchy

When the framework of a successful hierarchy is viewed in a developmental context, it becomes apparent that *subordination hierarchy* is a more descriptive term for canine social structure. Maintenance of an existing hierarchy depends on underlings advertising their respect for higher-ranking individuals. The *status quo* is maintained because, lower-ranking individuals seldom challenge authority and so only occasionally, is there need to enforce higher rank with a display of physical, or more likely psychological, dominance.

Growing up around larger pups, adolescents and adult dogs, puppies simply cannot compete on the social scene in view of their smaller size and inferior physical and psychological strength. Thus, puppies learn their station in life well before they become sufficiently large and strong to be a threat to the established order. Most adult dogs are quite lenient with young pups until they approach adolescence, whereupon adults (males especially) relentlessly pursue, stand-over and growl at the adolescents (males especially). Even so, harassment by adult dogs is largely psychological, rather than physical. It would be a perversely undersocialized adult dog, which physically beats up young puppies.

Nonetheless, during the crucial puppy/adolescent stage of hierarchical development, youngsters are perpetually intimidated and harassed by adults and understandably learn to respond with exaggerated appeasement gestures to assuage the torment from their elders. Moreover, young adolescents quickly learn that bother from older dogs may be largely prevented by taking the initiative and demonstrating *active* appeasement *before* they are harassed. The pups' preemptive apology characteristically comprises: a low slung, wriggly approach with ears back, submissive grin and with tail and hindquarters awag. The youngster may paw the brisket and lick the muzzle of the older dog. The infantile pawing and muzzle-licking food-soliciting behaviors of puppyhood now acquire new meaning and are retained as neotenic appeasement gestures in adolescence and adulthood. In addition, the underdog may rollover and lift a leg to expose his inguinal region. And some may submissively urinate. Adult dogs may determine the age of a puppy/adolescent from the smell of the youngster's urine.

From this stage on, higher-ranking dogs need only chastise those individuals that do not voluntarily show deference and respect in their presence. Fighting and physical dominance rarely come into play during the maintenance of hierarchical harmony. On the contrary, the major function of hierarchical structure is to lessen the amount of fighting. Once established, the hierarchy provides most of the solutions before problems arise. For example, when there are two dogs but only one bone, the ownership of the bone is pre-decided and therefore, there is nothing to fight about.

As a role model, we should always bear in mind the geriatric Yorkie, who habitually lords it over the two-year-old Great Dane. Any attempts in physical domination would no doubt end in one gulp. Instead the Yorkie patiently and gently, yet confidently and firmly trained the Great Dane by defining and setting limits for appropriate behavior. The Yorkie had the forethought and common sense to take the time to train the Great Dane at the right time — when he was still a puppy. Perhaps we should learn from this and do the same with pet dogs. Indeed, using brain over brawn to educate young puppies is the only safe, expedient and efficacious means for children to gain respect from adult dogs. Mental control is the key to success.

Play

Puppies and play are virtually synonymous. The very thought of a group of young puppies conjures up a picture of virtually non-stop, fun-loving, boisterous and bumbling play sessions. In fact young pups spend over 90% of their waking hours playing. But aside from the fun-factor, puppy play is also serious business. Play has many important functions. Puppies spend most of their play sessions practicing all-important hunting, fighting and survival skills. At four- to five-weeks-of-age, puppy play is characterized by puppies bumbling around, bumping into each other with frequent and amusing, bungled ambush attempts. But by eight weeks, most pups have become good little hunter-fighters and are quite adept and stalking, chasing and pouncing on their littermates.

In addition to perfecting all the ingredients of an adult dog's social and sexual behavioral repertoire, play affords puppies the opportunity to learn the relevance and appropriateness of each individual behavior. The choreography of early puppy play behavior is often hilariously inappropriate and utterly unacceptable socially. A young pup will playfully chase down and bite a littermate, only for the surprise attack to gently dissolve into ribald mounting sequence. Most young pups appear to adhere to the *Puppy Prime Directive*: if it moves, attack and/or mount at will. Soon they learn that animate objects are more fun to hunt and mount and that inanimate objects are best reserved for destruction. Thereafter, the puppy learns to further restrict his hunt and mount activities to animals that are in the mood. The puppy learns not to bother grumpy old adult dogs, not to bother people, not to bother the cat, etc. Eventually, the puppy learns to restrict his playful advances to like-minded individuals. And eventually he learns the relative social appropriateness of fighting versus mounting.

Invariable, puppies go “over the top” as they get worked up during the course of play-fighting. Many sessions are temporarily terminated with short time-outs, usually following a short spat or disagreement. How to recover quickly, or bounce back, from a disagreement and resume playing is one of the most important skills pups have to learn before they can confidently enjoy the world of big dogs. Puppies learn that play has many rules, that breaking rules has unpleasant consequences, but that the unpleasant consequences are not necessarily the end of the world. All the puppy has to do is apologize, resume playing once more, and not break the rules in the future. Play tutors young puppies in social savvy, enabling them to develop the requisite know how and confidence to become a player in the exquisitely complicated and sophisticated social scene of adult dogs.

From the viewpoint of raising domestic puppies, bite inhibition is the single most important lesson learnt from play. With their penchant for biting and their needle-sharp teeth, many owners consider puppies to be on par with seek and destroy missiles. It would be disastrous for this type

of behavior to continue into adulthood. Paradoxically though, it is the puppies' biting behavior which ensures that adult dogs develop soft mouths.

Puppies are veritable biting machines and their bites hurt. And indeed they should! Sharp teeth enable puppies to inflict pain with their weak jaws, so puppies have adequate opportunity to learn that biting hurts. Puppies chew and bite everything. The first thing they learn is the difference between inanimate objects and sentient beings (people and other animals) that feel and react to the bites. The negative feedback from the bitee (cessation of play) prompts puppies to tone down both the force and the frequency of their biting behavior. It is essential puppies learn this before they develop the strong jaws of adults.

It is a rare dog (as it is a rare person) that never squabbles or fights. However, just as people can resolve disagreements without resorting to physical violence and inflicting bodily harm, dogs can do likewise. Squabbling and fighting are quite normal for dogs. Causing harm to other dogs is not normal. Whether or not a dog harms humans or his own kind depends almost entirely on the level of bite inhibition he developed during puppyhood and adolescent play sessions.

Play sessions in puppy classes offer a wonderfully precise diagnostic tool for assessing the success of each puppy's ongoing socialization and its developing temperament. It is easy to determine the level of confidence in each puppy — to spot aggressive and fearful pups, bullies and wimps and to recommend immediate remedial socialization.

As a word of caution, if a puppy's socialization program is *restricted* to only one night a week at puppy class (heaven forbid!), the puppy is highly likely to develop into a rambunctious bully, or a cowering wimp. The level of energy within a group of playful puppies creates a chain reaction that quickly approaches critical mass. The play becomes excessively fast and physical. Those puppies entering into the fray are inadvertently trained as play-maniacs, which become extremely difficult to control around other dogs. Also, the sheer level of becomes too much for some of the more sensitive and smaller puppies in class, which quickly start to de-socialize. Play should not destroy obedience and it should not ruin temperament.

The hard and fast rule for puppy play sessions is that they should be temporarily interrupted every 15 seconds or so. At the very least, owners should take each puppy by the collar and wait for him to sit and acknowledge his owner's presence before offering a food treat and allowing play to resume once more. In this fashion, the instruction "Go Play" rewards the puppy for sitting calmly and paying attention to his owner. Thus, rather than becoming a distraction to training, play is the best reward in training. In fact, play-training is the way to go.

Certainly, puppy classes are a fun night out for puppies and owners to socialize and have a good time. And certainly, the dynamic chain reaction of puppy play sessions is ideal to therapeutically re-vamp the pup's dog-dog socialization program, which has temporarily been on hold over the past few weeks (while the puppy was confined indoors). But even so, puppy classes should not be considered an entire socialization curriculum. In order to become and remain fully socialized, puppies, adolescents and adult dogs must continue to meet and play with *unfamiliar* dogs of *different ages*. There is no socialization exercise that surpasses a good old dog walk to play in a local dog park.

Communication

"In man, social intercourse has centered mainly on the process of absorbing fluid into the organism, but in the domestic dog and to a lesser extent among all wild canine species, the act charged with most social significance is the excretion of fluid. For man the pub, the *estaminet*, the *Biergarten*, but for the dog the tree trunk, the lintel of door or gate, and above all the lamppost, form the focal points of community life. For a man, the flavors of alcoholic drinks, but for a dog the infinitely variegated smells of urine are the most potent stimuli for the gregarious impulse."

From *The Lamppost, A Study of the Social Life of the Domestic Dog* by Sirius (quoted in *Sirius* by Olaf Stapledon)

Humans communicate largely by the spoken and written word. (Hence this book.) Dogs, however, employ several different “languages”

Body language — comprising a broad repertoire of facial expressions and body postures such as, play bows, butt-swings, submissive grins, pilo-erection, ear dips and tail wags

Vocal communication — via a wide variety of barks plus all sorts of whimpers, whines, howls and growls

Olfactory communication — by investigating muzzles, ear glands, tail glands, vaginal and anal sac secretions and particularly, from sniffing urine and fecal deposits of other dogs. Dogs may discern an enormous amount of social information using their well developed sense of smell

Body Language

Even though few of us are fluent in the many dog languages, most of us can tell the difference between a friendly dog and an unfriendly one. The dog seems to get the message across with very little difficulty. It is as easy to sense the aura of a confident, relaxed and easygoing dog as it is to observe specific behaviors and body postures. Such dogs fairly exude warmth and friendliness: Head held high with a big doggy laugh, gamboling gait, with a relaxed, curved tail wagging the dog's rump. Similarly one can literally feel the tension emanating from a dog which is not friendly: Head lowered, ears flattened, piercing stare, teeth bared, growling, piloerection along the back, stiff-legged, and tail held high, straight, stiff and usually vibrating.

Similarly, it is easy for most people to distinguish between high-ranking and low-ranking dogs. Characteristically a high-ranking dog walks with a confident and purposeful gait, with head and tail held high, large eyes and raised ears, whereas a low-ranking slinks along in a fawning, obsequious gait, with lowered head, drawn back lips and protruding or licking tongue, narrow blinking eyes, lowered or flattened ears, raised paw and tail tucked between the legs. In extreme submission the dog may roll over and urinate.

It is hard to live with a dog for even a few days without learning a wide vocabulary of his body language. Most owners have a fairly firm grounding on how a dog acts when he is happy, confident, friendly, deferential, fearful, or aggressive. In fact, most dog owners have successfully compiled a comprehensive and descriptive doggy dictionary of body language covering much of the dog's behavior repertoire.

Vocalizations

The most misunderstood canine cues are vocalizations. Barking and especially growling are nearly always interpreted as threats, and on occasions, they are. But often they aren't. Barking, by its very nature is thought to be the ultimate vacillatory cue, expressed when the dog experiences conflict between two courses of action. For example, barking means: "I want to play... but I daren't," "I like you... but I'm not sure," or "Come here... but keep your distance." Once the dog makes up his mind what he wants to do, he generally does it, whereupon he has neither the time nor the inclination to bark.

Growling is more commonly used as a threat. Even so, feeling uneasy in a given situation is by far the most common reason for a dog to growl. Alternatively, growling and maybe soft biting/mouthing may be used as solicitations to play. Growling can be particularly worrying to owners, because often there are no discernible differences between threat-growls, insecure-growls and the dog's vast repertoire of play-growls.

What if you have a lot of difficulty stopping the dog from growling? Are we dealing with a dreaded dominant delinquent dog? — An aggressive cur? — An alpha leader of the pack? Most likely not. Characteristically, growly and blustery dogs are middle-ranking males, who have limited experience and are insecure of their social standing and so, usually resort to bluff and protracted threats. Often the dog may growl incessantly to add major emphasis to a minor point. Most overtly aggressive dogs are all bark and no bite. Indeed, a true top dog is a rather cool and

relaxed customer, who very rarely resorts to threats of any kind, let alone lengthy blustery bluffs. Instead the threat is subtle and the follow up is immediate, short and sharp.

Often, "atmosphere cues" provide the only clue to correctly interpret the dog's intentions. Atmosphere cues may range from quite subtle movements (e.g., paw-raising) to gross body gestures (e.g., playbows and prances), which signal a change in the meaning of everything that follows. For example, raising a paw signals that subsequent chasing, growling and biting are all meant in play. Dogs excel in reading contextual cues; most people do not.

Olfactory Communication

Many dog owners have realized, dogs urinate far more frequently than is required by physiological need. Indeed, urinary scent marking serves many important functions, including territorial demarcation, sexual attraction, individual recognition and advertisement of puppy license.

Puppy License To Misbehave

Testosterone is the hormone which makes male urine smell male. Thus, the "maleness" of a dog's urine depends on level of testosterone in the body. In most mammals, adults have much higher testosterone levels than youngsters. This is not true for dogs though. Plasma testosterone levels start to rise by the time the male pup reaches four to five months old, whereafter testosterone levels reach a maximum at ten months of age and then fall to adult male levels by eighteen months of age. At the ten-month peak, testosterone levels in adolescent male dogs may be as much as five to seven times greater than adult levels.

Urine odor, therefore, betrays the age of young male dogs. The odor of puppy urine is quite distinct. The puppy's size, shape, sound, color, behavior and especially, his smell, all advertise the youngster's age. A rollover with a leaky urethra is a means for the pup to display his *puppy license* to older and/or higher ranking individuals: "Yo! Sniff this urine. See, I'm just a young puppy and don't know any better. Please don't harm me. I didn't mean to jump on your tail and bite your ears. He! He! He!" And sure enough, most socialized adult dogs are quite tolerant and lenient towards young pupskis. However... once testosterone levels start to rise, the male puppy's license to misbehave is rudely canceled. In fact, by ten months of age, adolescent male urine smells sooper-doooper, ultra-mega-hyper-male, informing all adult dogs: "Why lookyhere. This young urinator must be a developing male adolescent — a potential thorn in the side of social harmony. Let's educate the young fellow right now, while we still can." And sure enough, most adult dogs (especially males) start to harass developing male pups to put them in their place *before* they become a significant challenge on the social scene.

Territorial Marking?

The concept of territoriality incorporates the notions of marking as well as defence. In wolf packs, a greater concentration of male urine marks appear to be distributed along the peripheral buffer zone of the pack's territory compared with the core of the territory.

Perimeter marking by males is similarly prominent with domestic dogs. But, since most domestic dogs are confined to artificial "territories" by walls and fences, and since male dogs tend to urinate against vertical objects, one would expect the majority of urine marking to occur along the perimeter. Surprisingly though, perimeter marking was not observed in an observational study of free-ranging suburban domestic dogs, i.e., dogs which silly owners allowed to roam the neighborhood at different times of the day and night. Instead, free-roaming dogs regularly and heavily marked a number of often-used radial routes, which lead away from and back to their individual homes. Thus, most marking occurred close to home.

Free-roaming dogs did not actively protect the central area of their home range from other free-roaming dogs, nor did urinary scent marking appear to be effective in repelling other dogs, which

freely entered and marked inhabited areas, sometimes when the resident was present. Free roaming domestic dogs do not appear to be in the least bit territorial and in fact, some dogs welcome visitors.

Dogs can distinguish between urine marks from different individuals and male dogs sniff and urinate more frequently in response to urine marks from unfamiliar males, compared with urine from familiar males and compared with their own urine. Also, a dog's response to unfamiliar urine decreases with repeated exposure, as if "strange-male" urine progressively loses its strangeness. Rather than being an agonistic display of territorial defense, urinary scent marking by domestic dogs appears to be a means to make a strange environment smell like home, by masking the unfamiliar odors with individual urine. Urine marking appears to be the canine equivalent of personalizing a new home with furnishings and possessions.

Urinary scent marking is not the prerogative of male dogs. On the contrary, many bitches urinate and also, many bitches will raise a leg when doing so. However, the female manner of raising a hind leg usually differs from the characteristic male leg lift posture. Male dogs stand with body weight forwards while a hind leg is abducted at the hip joint and the stifle swings out and upwards to lie above the backbone, so that urine may be jetted laterally towards some vertical object, which was in dire need of marking. Bitches, on the other hand, normally raise a hind paw which is brought forwards underneath the body, usually while the bitch is partially squatting. Often her rear end may be swiveled to one side to direct the urine.

Basically, dog urine is the canine equivalent of e-mail. P-mail if you like. Each urine mark contains its own message displayed on a communal message board. "Spot was here!" "So was Rex!" "Me too! Little Twerpie here." "Hi! My name's Butch and I'm ten months old." "Well, my name's Roger and I've been neutered." "Shame! This is Trixie and I'm just hot to trot!" "Spot was here!" "Me too!" "Me too!" "Me too!" "And me. It's Twerpie again!"