



Human Emotions vs. Canine Instinct

the struggle, conflict and confusion

Man and dog have shared their paths for thousands of years. Some studies put the figure over 100,000 years. It's a proven fact that man has bonded with dogs since before dogs were truly domesticated. The wolf, as it was domesticated into the common housedog was a companion of man, and may be equally responsible for man's evolution as for the evolution of the wolf into the dog itself.

Humans and dogs communicate much differently, and it is this difference that is often the cause for much confusion. Where humans rely on verbal communication, dogs rely primarily on non-verbal communication. Dogs often become confused through too much verbal dialog and this confusion can send them into fight or flight drive.

When we teach dogs a new behavior we use a system of luring and shaping. We move a piece of food or a toy in a direction we want the dog to follow. As the dog learns these traits, we later tag a verbal command onto that behavior and *name it*. However a dog remains more likely to follow a physical signal over a verbal command. This is why hand signals are a very fair way to cue a dog for a behavior.

In order to teach a dog something new, we opt to get him to focus calmly on what it is we are trying to teach. We use food and hand signals to shape these behaviors and then food to reward. Furthermore, when a dog is calm he is generally more likely to be receptive to learning.

One of the primary mistakes humans make with dogs is ignoring their hardwired instincts. Instincts are at the core of muscle memory in almost every living creature and they protect us from harm. For example, if someone throws something toward your face, your instinct will dictate your hands to come up and protect your face. A dog's instincts are primarily geared toward two drives: protection and food – both of which fall under self-preservation.

Our bond with the dog has become so wired into us that interaction between them and us is almost second nature: we know dogs will sniff us, we know that dogs like to be petted

and so on. We feel that we understand dogs, until something goes wrong. Most people do not have an understanding how to handle a dog that is acting up, one that is afraid, or one that is dominant and/or aggressive. More often than not our interaction with these dogs will exacerbate the situation.

Dogs that have been exposed to severe trauma often exhibit behaviors out of the norm and these behaviors often land them in trouble with their humans. A common example is rescue dogs. Dogs at shelters may have been exposed to some extreme trauma such as the sudden loss of their human family whether by accident or intentional abandonment. This stress coupled with the daily stress of living in an environment plagued with the smells, sights and sounds of fear, death and disarray sends dogs back to their primal drives: fight or flight. I call this behavior Kennel Syndrome. I've written an article on Kennel Syndrome available at www.blackbeltdogtraining.com

Kennel Syndrome will often mask a dog's true personality in his quest for survival. For example a strong dominant dog may feign submission and a submissive dog may act dominant. In order to properly evaluate a dog, we want to strip away the overlying mask to see the true personality of the dog. One simple and fair way to do this is to give the dog some time where we don't expect anything of him. Allowing a dog to be a dog and allowing him the opportunity to examine his surroundings in a safe manner is the fairest way to allow the dog to learn that we mean him no harm. We want to be a neutral outside observer even when we begin to eventually interact with him.

Dogs that are withdrawn as well as those exhibiting high drives should be allowed space and time before interaction. The key aspect of the dog's personality we are looking for is his ability to interact with humans neutrally. This is the key to whether we can live with the dog or not. Many people force this interaction onto the dog and this can trigger unfavorable behaviors. Humans feel that interaction, even if forced, will solve all of the dog's woes; nothing could be further from the truth. Although we can be there for the dog, if the dog seeks us out, we should not in any way force this interaction upon them. Most importantly, if we *do* interact with them during these stressful times, our verbal dialog should be kept to a minimum.

All too often people will bring a new dog into their homes and immediately begin training or interacting with him on day one. The single best, and fairest, method to acclimate a dog into a new environment is to allow him the space and time he needs. This should be done with the use of a barrier so the dog will feel safe and understand there is a "place" that is his. I suggest the use of a crate to do this. After some time of "decompression" the dog will be ready to interact, and will most often seek out the person he chooses to interact with. I allow a dog to observe me in my environment and then become a part of this new world. This is a very fair way to integrate him into his new home. Everything should start with fairness, and using games of interaction in the beginning are a solid way to cement these relationships. There are many articles I've written as well as blog posts in which I address the importance of building a relationship before you begin training.

Another time when our emotions get in the way of solving problems is when dogs act dominant or aggressive. When dogs become aggressive it is generally as a result of an experience that sent them there. Because of our long domestication of dogs it is extremely rare for them to become suddenly human aggressive naturally, as it is unlikely for a dog to naturally become aggressive toward other dogs. So why do we find aggressive dogs and why can't we fix it? Again, these basic instincts come out of the two primal drives of the dog, protection and preservation. If a dog feels his life is in danger or the life of someone he loves, he will act out in a protective manner. These traits are generally seen in a dog that has little structure from his human. If the human gives him a solid footing and shows him that he (the human) makes the decisions that revolve around these drives, and that the human acts in a fair manner, it is unlikely that the dog will have such behaviors.

For the most part when humans begin trying to correct a dog's drive they do so by yelling at the dog or hitting the dog. Both of these send a dog further into the drive that we are trying to prevent. If a dog feels that he is in trouble, yelling at him excites his drive and pushes him further and further into that drive. Dogs that feel "at risk" should first be taught that the person with them will not allow any danger to come to them. Then the dog should be taught that the human will not allow the dog to act up in a way that will put him or the human at risk. When dogs act aggressively it will incite other dogs to become aggressive as well. Remember, the other dog will act out of self-preservation as well. It is highly unfair to expect a dog that is being growled or barked at to simply back down. We must put the dog's dominant tendencies at bay if we expect the dog to survive.

All too often people will try several gadgets to "fix" the problem, and when they don't work they give up. If the head harness or body harness can't control them or the citronella collar doesn't work, the task becomes too arduous. This is generally the time when the dog ends up in the shelter and a bit later the dog ends up dead in a barrel, another statistic of a broken system.

If we can take our emotions out of the equation and look at the core instinct of the dog for a moment, we will be closer to a solution. In a pack, the leader decides the fate of the pack. He decides if the pack fights, eats, moves, etc. If someone decides to do this on their own, they are corrected, not with a clicker, but with a bite on the neck. I want to be clear here, if a dog can be trained to change his behavior with rewards instead of corrections, that will be the optimal way to train him. However, I feel that if a dog can't change his behavior without corrections that we should opt for physical corrections to teach the dog right from wrong. All too often people will try to retrain a dog that shows aggression with reward based training and get nowhere. If the training is not progressing it is regressing. We are not doing a dog any favors by supporting his bad habits through not correcting them. The more time it takes to correct them without progress, the deeper seated these behaviors become.

Again, we are dealing with our emotions of feeling bad for the dog by placing a correction on a behavior that could cost the dog his life. Serious aggression in dogs is generally not something that will be fixed by a weak handler or slight re-direction. The

handler and the redirection must be physically and mentally strong enough to dissuade the dog from his destructive behavior. This is exactly what his instinct would dictate. If the dog does not learn from a slight redirection or a reward for “leaving it” the next option must be compliance. There are those that will wince at giving a dog a firm correction, but again, these people are throwing a human emotion onto a problem of canine instinct. If you think correcting a dog is abuse, consider the alternative of shutting his life away behind steel bars or worse yet. I’d like to note that corrections for dangerous behavior is a world apart from those that believe in heavy handed training methods. I am not speaking about training here; I am speaking of stopping dangerous behaviors before they become deadly.

Correcting a dog first entails trust, then clear communication of what we expect and what we will and will not tolerate. Since we lack the ability to rationally explain what we expect, we must show him in a fair but firm manner. We remove our emotions, we do not get upset or yell at the dog, we merely re-direct him in a physical way that prevents him from doing something dangerous or stupid. This redirection should be strong enough to “block” him from following through with his action and immediately teach him that we won’t tolerate him putting anyone at risk. The verbal command for this is a simple NO. In my article “THE BINARY DOG” I explain the importance of clear communication.

There are countless thousands of dogs living (waiting to die) in shelters right now that wish they had been given the opportunity to learn right from wrong. These dogs were given up on by their humans, their trainers and by society as a whole. They will pay the ultimate price – their lives. If only the humans could step outside of their emotions and give the dog the strength, structure and love he dog needs instead of what the humans think he needs, so many of these lives could be spared.

Yes there are those that are totally beyond hope, but this is the smallest percentage, and one I don’t even need to address here. The strong majority of dogs need only a bit of structure (not even corrections) to function properly. It is our human emotions that we lay upon these creatures that gets in the way of their survival.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:
<http://www.boundangels.org>

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