

A Holistic Approach to Training

By Jan Gribble

Many, if not all, behavioral problems have a direct link to the dog's physical, emotional and mental health. To be successful, any approach taken to address a behavioral problem must take into consideration the dog's diet, exercise, general health and relationship with its owner.

Sudden changes in behavior should always raise a red flag about the dog's physical health. The first step to addressing a change in behavior that is radically different than the dog's normal behavior is to have your veterinarian evaluate and treat, if necessary, any medical condition that may be the cause or a contributing factor of the behavior change.

For example, if your dog is housetrained and NEVER goes in the house, a sudden change in behavior where the dog starts to urinate inside warrants your veterinarian checking for a urinary tract infection. If the dog "learns" the behavior of eliminating in the house during this period of time, it may be necessary to re-train the dog, but the medical condition has to be resolved first for any training to be effective.

Diet

Dogs have a short digestive tract when compared to the length of the digestive tract in humans. This shortened GI tract reflects their developmental history as a carnivore, like their relatives the coyote and wolf. While humans are able to utilize the carbohydrates and energy contained in grains, in part because of the longer length of time it takes for food to pass through their GI tract, dogs are unable to benefit fully from the nutrition contained in grains. This is the reason why a lower quality dog food, which is comprised mainly of corn or wheat, produces a larger fecal load – less of the kibble is broken down into usable nutrition and more of it is expelled, unused, at the other end.

While some dogs are allergic to corn and wheat, a far greater percentage have a food intolerance to grain products. This intolerance is often reflected in gastrointestinal problems such as vomiting or diarrhea. It can also cause gassiness, itchiness and a host of other symptoms which in turn can be contributing factors to behavioral problems such as irritability, a low tolerance for being handled and many other issues.



In addition to using cheaper protein sources such as grains, most lower quality dog foods also contain dyes and other additives that are designed to make the appearance of the kibble attractive to the owner purchasing the food and sugars that make the food more palatable to the dog. As studies with children have amply demonstrated, diets containing artificial dyes and processed sugars often have a serious and negative impact upon the child's behavior. It should come as no surprise to discover a similar link between the food a dog eats and its behavior.

Weight

Obesity is a growing problem with the family dog for many of the same reasons it is a problem with Americans: overeating and insufficient exercise.

Excess weight can lead to a variety of health problems for the overweight dog. For example, obese dogs are at a higher risk of diabetes and the added stress on bones and joints can lead to arthritis and other orthopedic conditions. Pain is a contributing factor to many behavioral issues, including aggression.

It is important to know that the feeding instructions on bags of kibble usually suggest feeding a larger quantity of food than the average dog needs to maintain a healthy weight. A common mistake many dog owners make is that they don't accurately measure the amount of food, or that they don't calculate the caloric impact of the treats they provide, into the dog's daily requirement.

To accurately judge if your dog is overweight, the rule of thumb is that your dog should have a "tuck up" underneath, a waistline viewed looking down at the dog and you should be able to feel ribs without pressing hard.

While overfeeding and a lack of exercise are the two most important factors in obesity, there are health conditions, such as hypothyroidism, that can result in weight gain. If you are having problems controlling your dog's weight and are sure it isn't related to overfeeding, either kibble or treats, consulting your veterinarian is your next step.

Exercise

Exercise is a critical component to your dog's physical and mental health. While physical exercise alone will not cure all behavioral problems, it is often a good starting point.

Before starting an exercise program with your dog it is a good idea to make an appointment with a veterinarian to ensure your dog is in good health. The type or amount of exercise undertaken with a dog will depend, in large part, upon the dog's age, physical structure (conformation), general health and prior injuries. As with any fitness program, it is important to begin slowly and increase the frequency and duration of exercise gradually. The type of exercise can vary from day to day, but, like their owners, dogs are more likely to suffer injuries if only exercised on weekends. Regular exercise is good for both the pet and owner.

Some of the more common ways to exercise a dog are walking, jogging or biking. While walking may not provide sufficient exercise to an adolescent Labrador or Golden Retriever, it is the perfect exercise for many older dogs or smaller breeds. Training your dog how to walk correctly on a leash will increase the benefits of walking as exercise, for both you and your dog.

When the weather is not conducive to outdoor exercise, a good way to exercise a dog inside is using retrieving and a long hallway. Dogs of all breeds and ages can be taught to retrieve a ball or toy.

Mental stimulation

When pet owners complain about the problems they are having with their dogs, well-meaning but uninformed friends and neighbors often tell them their dog simply needs more exercise. However, a focus on physical exercise alone, without addressing the dogs' need for mental exercise as well, results in an improvement in stamina and increased energy. Without a suitable outlet for this increased energy the unsuspecting pet owner may find the dog has even more ebullience than before and that the "problem" behaviors have not improved. Dogs which are sufficiently exercised, both physically and mentally, are less likely to be considered "problem" dogs by their owners.

Mental exercise, using the dog's natural instincts, is an important component of a dog's emotional health. It often tires a dog faster than physical exercise and has a dramatic impact upon the dog's general behavior.

Although dogs have been domesticated for thousands of years, the instinctive behaviors hard-wired into dogs' genetic code which pertain to survival are still very similar to those of its ancestors. The most

frequently seen behaviors that relate to instinct are those that involve hunting, killing and eating (prey drive), cooperating with the pack to either increase the probability of eating or for safety (pack drive) and responses to a real or perceived threat (defense drive). Left to their own devices, dogs' innate instincts often result in behaviors that their owners find inappropriate or unacceptable. By understanding and channeling those instincts into acceptable behaviors, owners can reduce their frustration with their pet and, at the same time, improve their dog's mental and physical well-being.

NOTE: The idea presented below involves food and is best suited for single dog households.

To stimulate the activities involved in hunting and to teach a dog to use its nose, you can play "go find" with a dog of any size or breed. If your dog doesn't have a solid sit/stay, a leash can be used to tether the dog to a doorknob or solid piece of furniture. A treat is placed in plain sight in front of the dog and the dog is released with a "go find" command. As your dog begins to catch on to this game, the difficulty is increased by placing the treat behind a piece of furniture. In short order, the treat can be hidden in a different room, out of sight. (Hiding the treat on a bookshelf is not a good idea unless you want your dog to develop its abilities to climb furniture.)

Emotional health

Dogs are not small people in furry coats, and this recognition is critical to being able to promote an emotionally healthy environment for your dog. Dogs use their sense of touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste to an extent unimagined by most people and dogs need to be provided with opportunities to use these senses to explore and investigate their world. Constantly restraining the dog, whether with a crate, behind a fence or even with a leash limits the dog and prevents it from reaching its full potential.

An emotionally healthy environment gives dogs a break from the artificial setting we create for our dogs and allows dogs to be dogs for at least a short period of time on a regular basis. Training, where the dog can be safely off leash, is imperative to providing for a dog's emotional health. Dog parks, which are another form of confinement, do not provide the environment necessary to support a dog's emotional health.

Relationship

Dogs are social creatures and have evolved from living in a pack with other dogs to living primarily in a pack with humans. However, the dog's basic instincts have not changed through the millennium and while



we can, and do, expect our dogs to make adaptations to fit with our lifestyles, it is important that we respect our dogs enough to make adaptations ourselves to meet our dog's needs.

Equality is not a concept understood by dogs. To a dog, living in a pack structure harmoniously means understanding where each individual pack member's place is in that pack. While pack structure is hierarchical, it is not tyrannical. Good leaders ensure that all pack members adhere to the basic rules of the pack that promote living peacefully in a social environment, without bullying or trying to use force to achieve these goals. Respect is a key issue here – good leaders are respected, not feared.

Working in a partnership with your dog does not equate with allowing your dog to do anything and everything he wants. It is about recognizing your dog as a dog and respecting his needs, while providing the boundaries and structure necessary to enable your dog to fit into your household.

Training a dog helps the owner develop a healthy relationship with his or her dog and is necessary to meet the emotional and mental needs of the dog. Dogs require structure and boundaries and training helps provide these as well as teaching the dog self-control, accountability, responsibility and reliability.

Taking a holistic approach to training will result in a happier, healthier dog with fewer, if any, behavioral problems.

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