

# CHANGING THE PET-OWNER INTERACTION

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## Introduction

When an owner is having problems with their pet, there are both owner driven factors and pet driven factors that are contributory. Some animals with problem behaviors are normal but have learned that certain behaviors are tolerated and beneficial for them. Other animals may be abnormal and respond to owner interaction in a different manner than expected'. In some situations the owner is interacting with the pet in an inappropriate manner that although unintended may prolong, worsen, or facilitate the problem behavior. The pet on the other hand, is often unaware of what the owner considers proper behavior and therefore is choosing behaviors that it feels are the most appropriate responses. What commonly occurs is miscommunication between the owner and their pet. The owner is using a human form of communication, reasoning and language, something most pets do not understand in the same manner as intended by their owners. The pet however, is communicating in the manner most appropriate for its species, and therefore often misunderstood by the human. The first step in behavior therapy is changing the pet-owner relationship and creating clear rules and expectations. This must be done in a manner that is understood by the pet. The goal of changing how owners and their pets communicate is to create an environment where it is easier for the owner to control the pet and thus elicit good behavior. This step is most useful in treating behavior problems in companion dogs.

## *The Theory*

The theory involved in changing the pet owner relationship is that cross species communication often results in misunderstandings and thus problem behaviors. Therefore, clearer communication is needed. Owners frequently misunderstand a dog's expectations in social communication and group living. Communication is a behavior that has a goal and a function. Communication is an action that takes place between a sender and a receiver.<sup>2</sup> For communication to be functional, the receiver must understand the message. The information that is transferred between sender and receiver can have 4 possible outcomes: 1.) Benefit the sender and receiver, 2.) Benefit the sender and manipulate the receiver, 3.) Disadvantage the sender and benefit the receiver (eavesdropping), 4.) Disadvantage the sender and the receiver (spite).<sup>2</sup> Although owners often feel that the fourth option spite is taking place, most likely what is occurring is a miscommunication between species. Without clear communication problems can arise. The goal is to give the pet clear signals of what is expected so that behavior can begin to change and conform to owner's expectations. By bundling a series of learning and control tasks together, the owner can create an environment for clearer communication.

When owners seek help with their problem dog, the problem may be labeled a "dominance" or leadership problem, which can be a simplification of the issue. Practitioners of applied animal behavior interpret dominance hierarchies, ranking and how they interact in the human-dog relationship many different ways and may use varying criteria to define dominance<sup>3,4,5</sup>. The concept of dominant and subordinate relationships between animals was developed from observation of animals (wolves, baboons, chickens) living in social groups.<sup>6</sup> Social hierarchies arranged around dominant and subordinate relationships decrease the conflict associated with the allocation of critical resources, i.e. food, shelter, mates and territory<sup>7</sup>. When living in social groups, canids will establish dominance hierarchies that may dictate access to certain resources such as food, resting places, favored possessions, territory and mates but may or may not involve aggression<sup>8</sup>. These social relationships can be extended to the human members of the household<sup>9</sup>. However, a case could be made that dominance behavior may occur without aggression and instead be about control of the outcome. In domestic canid groupings, overt aggression is rare and deference common. Owners often inadvertently reinforce a dominant outcome for the dog by

deferring to the dog's demands. This sets the dog up as the one in charge, and each interaction that ends with deference to the dog reinforces that assumption. This has also been called resource holding potential which can affect the outcome of encounters between individuals. Resource holding potential has been defined as "an index of competitive ability which allows the prediction of the outcome of interactions between competitors. It is determined by both physical attributes such as size, weight, age and the outcomes of previous encounters between familiar individuals."<sup>10</sup> So perhaps the issue is not always one of "dominance" as much as one of control. The animal has learned that certain behaviors result in certain outcomes, which are favorable to the dog. In addition, often a behavior occurs because it can, in other words, the owners do not prevent the dog from engaging in a certain behavior and that in and of itself can be reinforcing. Some dogs that control their environment may do so because it is important to them to be in control. Others may control because they can but yet are anxious about the outcome. Changing the pet-owner relationship focuses on "control" of the dog, which often prohibits the dog from engaging in behaviors that "control" the environment and thus the owner. This alone can have an effect on the expression of problem behaviors.

### ***The program***

None of the elements in this program are new. They have been used before and discussed many places in the applied animal behavior literature. The goal of this program is to place them together and counsel the owner on how and why changing the pet-owner relationship is beneficial to them and their pet. Initially, the owner is educated about canid social structure. Second, the owner is told how dogs communicate and what dominance and subordination mean to dogs. Third, how animals learn is briefly explained to the owner. Finally, owners are told of how increasing their control over their dog is a positive action that can make their dog more relaxed and compliant in the long term.

The first step is a program that requires the dog to comply with an owner command to obtain anything the dog wants. This has been called numerous things since its inception. ("Nothing in life is free" by Dr. Victoria Voith" and "No such thing as a free lunch" and "Learn to earn" by William E. Campbell<sup>12</sup>) In essence, the dog is required to follow an owner command, such as "sit" to obtain anything that the dog wants. This could be access to the outdoors to eliminate, food, petting, a ball the list is endless. The goal is for the dog to "earn" everything they desire by deferring to the owner. Deference is accomplished when the dog follows the command to sit or down. If the dog performs the command prior to being asked, it must do something else. This is critical. Unless the owner gives a command and then the dog complies, the dog is still controlling the situation and deference has not occurred. The goal is for the owner to have control. Although many owners have been told that they should control their dog, usually they are counseled to use physical control methods. While an owner can have control by trying to physically control a dog this can be difficult and potentially dangerous. Instead, in this program the owner uses their ability to physically control the environment and the resources to control the dog. By using benign control of resources and deference for access, the owners place themselves in a "leadership" position. It is not necessary for the owner to physically control the dog, merely to control access to things the dog wants. If the dog will not obey the command, the resource is withheld. In essence the dog is offered a choice-do you want the resource enough to comply or not. For some dogs the answer is yes, for others the answer may be no. Once the dog has learned to comply, if they defer by waiting quietly, the resource may be given.

The second step is control of attention. Many dogs with problem behaviors engage in numerous attention seeking behaviors. These include nudging the owner, pushing, leaning, barking, whining, pacing, scratching the owner, bringing toys and climbing on the owners lap to get attention. The attention can even be "negative" attention such as pushing the dog away or yelling at it; the desired response is an interaction. Some dogs use attention-seeking behavior to control the owner, while other may have underlying anxieties, which stimulate them to constantly seek information about their environment and social status<sup>13</sup>. In either case, the owners are told that they must ignore all attention seeking behaviors. If the dog approaches them for attention, they must ignore the dog. If the dog persists, then they must leave the room. Again, their response is to be benign. They are not to allow the dog to engage them in any interaction. However, this is not a prescription for ignoring the dog. They can give the dog attention, but with certain rules.

- They are only to give attention to the dog on their initiative.
- The attention should be given when the dog is calm and quiet.
- The goal is to reward calm, quiet, good behavior with positive owner-pet interaction. They can call the dog over, request that the dog sit or lie down and then pet the dog. However, it is also critical that they end the interaction and send the dog away. Some owners have difficulty in complying with this recommendation. For these owners it may be easier to start with short periods of signaled non-attention. The period of non-attention will at first be short, say 5 minutes. During that time the owner places a towel on their lap. The towel will serve as a signal to the dog that no attention is forthcoming. After the 5 minutes, normal interactions resume, but the attention must be earned. Over subsequent days the signaled non-attention time should increase so that finally all attention seeking can be ignored<sup>14</sup>.

If the problem is aggression, the type and amount of interaction are structured and detailed for the owner. This program of controlling attention has been used in other treatment plans for various behavior problems.<sup>15</sup><sup>16-17</sup> These rules also extend to how they are to play with their pet. The owner is instructed to only play with the pet when they initiate the playtime and end the game when they are done. The owner is encouraged to play games such as fetch, or engage in a walk with the dog if they can control the pace of the walk.

Finally, the dog is taught to sit/stay or down/stay on a verbal command. Eventually the dog should be able to sit while the owner leaves the room, returns and releases the dog. Once the dog can do this well, the owner is to introduce a verbal phrase to signal relaxation such as "chill", "relax" or "easy". Again the goal is to teach the dog to take contextual cues from the owner. When given the "chill" command, the dog is to be watching the owner with a calm, relaxed facial expression and body posture. If the owner tells the dog to "chill" the dog learns that this means to focus on my owner and wait for the next command. To facilitate learning this task, food rewards are used. This task is useful as a basis for counterconditioning, which is often used in behavior modification programs for other problem behaviors.<sup>7</sup><sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup><sup>20</sup> This program has also been called "Protocol for relaxation: behavior modification tier 1" by Karen Overall.<sup>21</sup>

The techniques described have been combined various ways in treatment protocols for separation anxiety, dominance aggression, fear aggression and compulsive behaviors<sup>7</sup><sup>12</sup><sup>13-14</sup>

### ***Potential problems and pitfalls***

This plan is not without its problems. Many owners have difficulty ignoring the attention seeking behaviors. What they like about their pet is the persistence and the perceived "need" the pet has for them. These owners are unaware of how their actions are reinforcing behaviors that they do not like or may be contributing to the problem behavior. It is imperative that the concept of control be explained to the owner and how their behavior can change the problem behavior exhibited by their pet. In addition, it is important that the owner not feel as though they are neglecting their pet. Therefore, they must be given guidelines for appropriate interactions. This can include a list of appropriate games, walks, and number of times that they can call the dog and pet it. Each case will be different and have different needs to encourage compliance. If aggression is the major problem then the owners must also be given instructions for safety around their pet and avoidance of further injury.

Another problem area can occur 10-14 days into the program. Many animals will initially respond well to the new rules for interaction. However, once they realize that the rules have changed, some dogs will increase their efforts to get the owner to interact in the old manner. This usually results in the dog engaging in attention seeking behaviors at even a higher level than previously exhibited. This is an extinction burst. If owners are warned about this phenomenon, they are prepared and ready to continue the program and wait out the pet. Many dogs will then return to compliant behavior if the owner persists with the plan.

### ***Results***

This is not meant to be a stand-alone treatment plan for any and all behavior problems. Neither does it replace the need for complete behavioral histories and diagnosis of behavior problems. Nearly all dog owners are given this plan as an adjunct to a more complete behavior

modification program designed to treat their specific problem(s). In each case this plan can act as a framework for beginning to change problem behaviors. Each environment and problem will be different and require modifications to this plan as well as a more in-depth behavioral treatment plan. However, what often is surprising is that many dogs improve greatly as judged by owner reports with only these three steps. What this plan seems to accomplish is to allow owners to change the way they interact with their pet with easy to follow and understand steps. Once owners see that they have the ability to control their pet, and in many cases still have a satisfying relationship, they are often empowered to continue to shape behaviors in more positive directions.

## **Conclusion**

Changing the pet-owner interaction is the first step in behavior therapy. It allows owners to be in control of their pet and its behavior in a benign way. When done correctly it empowers the owner to change their pet's behavior. This will often encourage them to go further and work on specific problems. When explained correctly owners gain a better understanding of canine communication and learning and can use this information in all their interactions with their pet.

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