

Me And My Dogs

Four Classifications of Dog Behavior

The Busy Dog

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Busy Dogs

Before defining busy dogs, it is important to say what busy dogs are not. They are not neurotic or hyper. They are busy, they are always doing something. Sometimes they do the same thing over and over or they could go from one activity to the next non-stop. Within this framework, busy dogs don't run around constantly getting into trouble, busy dogs are very methodical and focused in their activities. Activities include licking objects, sucking toys, chewing sticks, chasing balls and digging holes. If a dog is licking, sucking or chewing on themselves, they are not busy within this context; they need the attention of a vet. Busy dogs can also be nervous or fearful. They are not comfortable in crowds or with loud noises such as storms. These dogs also tend to be loners. They function well in a pack, but they would rather be by themselves most of the time. The busy behavior is often the way they self-manage their fears.

Neoteny

The classifications of problem behavior discussed in this paper are groupings of adolescent behaviors that persist into adulthood. Once identified, acceptable behaviors can be sorted into their proper sequence and unwanted behaviors eliminated. "The evolutionary process whereby an animal retains it's youthful characters as and adult is called neoteny. The idea that the dogs evolved neotenually was proposed originally by Bolk (1926) on the basis of morphology." (Coppinger 1995. Evolution of Working Dogs. Pg 38) It theorizes that in the domestic dog's evolution from wolves, their predatory behavior patterns were interrupted or truncated. For instance, in the **orient > eye-stalk > chase > grab-bite > kill-bite > dissect > consume** a working border collies' pattern is now **orient > eye-stalk > chase where** the eye-stalk is exaggerated and the grab-bite > kill-bite is eliminated. Grab-bite and kill-bite in a border collie working sheep would be considered a fault and the dog would not be bred. Neoteny is interesting because it describes the domestic dog as a wolf

stuck in adolescence. “The adolescent shows, in varying frequencies, both neonatal and adult motor patterns. What is important here is that the neonate cannot chew and the adult cannot suck, but the adolescent can and often does both. When an animal mixes neonatal and adult behavior in non-functional sequences, the result is often called ‘play’. Learning takes place when an animal rearranges the motor patterns into functional sequences.” (Coppinger 1995 Evolution of Working Dogs. pg 40)

This theory is fascinating because it leads to an understanding of the origin of so many irksome dog behaviors. “Over a thousand generations, natural predatory aggression in dogs has been channeled into stalking, pointing, herding and digging. These behaviors, together with shaking, carrying, guarding and burying, all manifest themselves in what could be called biologically dead-end behaviors in domestic dogs.” (Fogel 1990. Dogs Mind, pg 138) The majority of dogs today do not have a way to express their innate skills even in a modified form. The problem is then compounded by dog owners who use punishment to correct these unwanted behaviors. Busy dogs are nervous and fearful, even the mildest punishment is disturbing to them. It can even make the problem worse. Remember, most busy behaviors are the result of self-management of stress.

Even worse is when owners inadvertently reinforce the wrong behaviors by giving into their dog’s persistent demands. Instead of giving dogs an opportunity plays and exercise on a regular basis, dogs often bark, beg or bite to get what they want. Unfortunately, this behavior gets reinforced with petting or a treat instead of stimulating activity. It is this pattern of dogs looking for something to do, and owner’s incorrect response that leads to so many problems.

Busy Dogs

Stephen Budiansky “The interesting thing about breed characteristic behaviors in dogs is that they are removed entirely from their original, purposeful context ... These behaviors very much resemble the juvenile patterns of play in which bits and pieces of adult behavior chasing, ...stalking, mouthing objects, biting and grabbing – are run through a seemingly meaningless order and without any immediate purpose.” (Budiansky 2000. The Truth, pg 45). In this quote, Budiansky is discussing Mixed – Up Instincts, but this is a good definition and explanation for the behaviors of busy dogs. Is it possible that busy dogs are playing a piece of the predatory sequence over and over? They chase, mouth and chew seemingly without end. When they are not behaving in this way, they are nervous. Busy dogs should not be punished for their activity. They are typically sensitive and punishment can worsen the problem. Unfortunately, some busy dogs are diagnosed as hyperactive and are medicated. This class of dogs need to have understanding, acceptance and something to do.

Busy behaviors can fall into two categories, annoying and really annoying. If the annoying behavior is not harmful to the dog, people or objects, then consider doing nothing. If the behavior is harmful to the dog, other dogs, people or objects then it should be modified. The most common strategy is to train an incompatible behavior. This would be something the dog could not possibly do at the same time as the unwanted behavior. It is not possible to lay down and chase, mouth a toy and mouth and arm, or chew a bone and chew a chair leg all at the same time. Another strategy is *focused play*. Focused play is when a person is the focus dog play. Dog sports like agility, frisbee and hunting are examples of focused play. For the busy dog it is an opportunity to work through the predatory sequence instead of a single piece of it over and over. Frisbee for example is orient > eye/stalk > chase > bite. Breeds of dogs specialize in different parts of the sequence so chose a sport that is

compatible with that breed. Although it is unlikely to 'cure' the busy dog, focused play is a positive way to relieve much of their stress and give them something meaningful to do.

Focused Play

Focused play is when the dog owner focuses the dog in complex play. Dog sports like hunting, agility, and Frisbee™ are examples of focused play. It gives the busy dog an opportunity to work through the predatory sequence instead of a single piece of it over and over. A busy dog that chases everything that moves could benefit by being led through the entire sequence by playing fetch. First, let him choose what he wants to play with so he can *orient* to it. Then take it from him and show it to him, tease him with it to get him to really *eye* it. Pretend like you are going to throw it, but don't. Show it to him again, get him to *stalk* it. Throw it, let him *chase* it, *grab* it and *bite* it. An inexperienced dog may not bring it back and instead run away to *dissect* and *consume*. We want to eliminate dissect and consume in most domestic dogs, so you have a second toy ready to start the sequence over. Try to get as close as possible to your dog, help him *orient* to the toy you have then quickly move him to eye > stalk > chase. Then pick up the first toy, put it in your pocket and repeat the sequence.