

Me And My Dogs

Four Classifications of Dog Behavior

The Spoiled Dog

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Spoiled Dogs

Spoiled dogs are easy to identify, but difficult to treat. It is the owners of these dogs that overindulge them and many of them don't see a problem unless they or someone else gets seriously bitten. The problem with the owners of spoiled dogs is that they are so emotionally invested in their *children* they often displace their own feelings on the dog. They treat their dogs like children and dress them in cloths and feed them people food. Food is a huge issue with these dogs. Some owners go so far as to cook for their dogs every night. Spoiled dogs can even persuade their way into their owner's favorite chair or even their beds. They are given everything and don't know how to tolerate frustration. They often run away and don't come when called. Spoiled dogs' behavioral problems often start with whining, barking and nipping then escalate to growling, snapping and biting. Help usually is not asked for until the problem is out of control and "teaching dogs to tolerate disappointment is not always fun for owners, just as raising children is hard work." (McConnell 2002. The Other End, pg 163)

Normal Dog Behavior

Puppies are wonderful creatures. They are playful and cute, warm and fuzzy. Most people say "ahhhh" when they see a puppy playing and want to pick it up and hold it. Humans are drawn to puppies just as they are drawn to babies. We love them and want to take care of them. But just as babies grow up to be toddlers and adolescents, so do puppies. Children are to babies as dogs are to puppies. However, you would not raise your children like dogs, so why raise dogs like children? Many dog owners consider their dogs their children. There is a quote that says 'Dogs are for people who don't have children'. To expect childlike behaviors from dogs is unfair and most of the time, sets the dog up for failure. Dogs are dogs and should be treated like dogs. "The point is that we often

replace what is normal and correct for a canine with what we perceive to fair or reasonable for a human. This is where the trouble starts.” (Clothier 1996. Relationship, pg 6) What is normal behavior for a dog? Ian Dunbar, “Chewing, digging, barking, eliminating and greeting owners are all normal, natural and necessary canine behaviors.” (Dunbar 1996. Old Tricks, pg 59) This is what dogs do. When we get a dog, we often have dreams that the dog will play nicely with us during the day and lay quietly next to us in the evening. Although it is very possible, there is a lot of work that must go into training the dog owner and the dog. Again, Ian Dunbar, “Since it is the owners who often consider normal dog behavior irksome and inappropriate, the onus lies with owners to teach dogs how to appropriately express their basic doggy nature within the domestic setting.” (Dunbar 1996. Old Tricks, pg 62) In most cases this takes much more than a basic obedience class.

Puppies are amazing creatures. Most people say “Aw” when they see a puppy and want to pick it up and hold it. Humans are drawn to puppies just as they are drawn to babies. The behaviorist, Patricia McConnell Ph.D. is my favorite reference on this topic. She points out the puppies have large foreheads and big round eyes like a baby’s. As humans our brains are hard-wired to care for babies and easily generalize this to puppies. In her popular book, The Other End of The Leash, McConnell says “if you’re not the kind of person who loves to cater to your dogs, it might be tempting to laugh at people who do. But our tendency to be nurturing is not to be sneezed at; without it we’d be extinct. But as with everything else, if it’s misplaced or excessive, it can create a problem.”

So, what is the problem? Dog ownership has been linked to lower blood pressure and cholesterol. People who walk their dogs also get more exercise and have more social interactions. Dog owners on average have less stress which reduces many health risks. Great for people, but this discussion is about dogs. Dogs that are spoiled or overindulged are often fed improperly and don't get enough exercise so they tend to be overweight and have health problems. They can also be aggressive. Dog trainers and behaviorists have seen countless clients that cannot sit without their dog in their lap. When the dog is removed it bites. How many other people leave the room rather than push the dog off the couch or bed? Maybe you do, your dog is not spoiled and would never bite you, right. Try it. Force your dog off the couch today, if he snaps, you have a problem.

Pancreatitis

Many spoiled dogs are fed improperly. This includes but is not limited to table food. Generally, what happens is the dog does not eat for some reason. The dog owner becomes concerned and adds bacon or hamburger grease to their food. Later when the dog does not eat that, they feed them chicken or meat. Soon the dog learns that they will be fed more and more exotic foods if they don't eat. The dog owner gets stuck in a spiral of increasing demands by their dogs that sometimes results in food aggression or pancreatitis. Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas. Symptoms include abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea; depression and decreased appetite or lack of appetite. In severe cases of pancreatitis there may be signs of shock or total collapse. High fat diets are a common cause of chronic pancreatitis but a dog can get acute pancreatitis from a single episode of eating fat trimmed from a pork chop or steak. Chronic pancreatitis can result in acute pancreatitis because the dog is already sick and won't eat, and then the owner adds bacon grease to its food and makes matters worse.

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The problem with spoiled dogs is many of their owners overindulges the dog. They take pride in it. “My baby is so spoiled, but look how cute she is, smooch, smooch”. They don’t think they have a problem, until the day the dog bites them. “If you want your dog to be a polite house dog who is part of your family, then you need to raise her as you would any youngster and teach her how to tolerate not always getting what she wants the instant that she wants it.” (McConnell 2002. *The Other End*. Pg 36 -37) This quote is from Patricia McConnell’s very popular book, *The Other End of The Lease*. McConnell explains why we do what we do around dogs in terms we can understand. As trainers and behaviorists, we need to affirm owners of spoiled dogs for them for the loving relationship and teach them how to gain control. The average American household spends about \$1,400.00 a year to care for their dog, some spend much more than that. McConnell would not criticize anyone for buying an expensive bed for their dog, but she is clear that the human needs to be head of household. “If you’re not the kind of person who loves to cater to your dogs, it might be tempting to laugh at people who do. But our tendency to be nurturing is not to be sneezed at; without it we’d be extinct. But as with everything else, if it’s misplaced or excessive, it can create a problem.” (McConnell 2002. *The Other End*. Pg 164)

The common solution for spoiled dogs is the *nothing in life is free* method. This requires owners make their dogs work (sit, lay down, wait, etc.) for everything they get. It empowers the dog owner and is very effective in some situations. In the case of the spoiled dog, however, it may be too difficult for the *mom or dad* to set rules and enforce them on a consistent basis. Remember, these misbehaviors were the caused by over indulgence and by the time many of these people ask for help it has been continued out of fear. There are many documented cases of dog owners who were *afraid not to give to their dogs*, no matter how small they were. Trainers and behaviorist have multiple

stories of people who got bit by their little dog while it was sitting in their lap, or people who had to cook for their dog otherwise it wouldn't eat. Sounds crazy, but it's a real problem and it's becoming more common.

Let's return to Patricia McConnell for a solution that is effective and appealing to owners of spoiled dog. She writes;

“How you respond to dog you depends partly on his age. Just like people, younger dogs haven't yet learned how to control their emotions and desires, and it's up to us to help them. A lot of young dogs don't want petting or attention as much as they want activity, and they come up to their owners to get a game started. Of course, this is when many of us pet our dogs instead of going outside and playing with them. We're tired, and we finally got a chance to sit down, and we don't want to get up right then. So we pet our dog instead, gradually teaching her that although she can't get the exercise that she needs, at least she can mug us for a massage. The solution here is simple, although not necessarily easy. If you have a young healthy dog, especially one who sleeps in a crate all day long, then either get yourself outside and exercise with your dog or find someone else to do it for you.” (McConnell 2002. The Other End. Pg 165)

Over indulgent dog owners would have no difficulties spending more time playing with their dogs or indulging them even more by hiring a dog walker or bringing them to a doggie day care. Obviously, there is more work to do here than just dropping them off at day care, but it is a good place to start. Recommend a program that has small play groups. It will reduce some or all of the separation anxiety that spoiled dogs and their owners have. As a dog trainer, it will make your job easier if the dog and the owner get socialized. Then, look at all aspects of their relationship and know the client's willingness to use various techniques before you begin training.

In addition to supervised play with the dog owner or at day care, *independent play* is also important. Independent play is where the dog plays all by themselves. Many dogs don't know how to do this especially spoiled dogs. A great solution is a toy filled with their food. It will also help solve the problem of the dog not eating dog food. A common problem with spoiled dogs is that they will not eat

dry dog food and their owners will feed them people food instead. There are lots of toys on the market that the owner can put kibble in with a little peanut butter or soft cheese and the dog will play as they eat. Other suggestions for independent play are soft squeaky toys or puzzles. To rebuild trust and positively reinforce the command come, the owner should periodically check in with their dog, take the toy away, look at it, admire it and give it back. The dog will love the toy and the owner even more.