

THE DOG AND FAMILY THERAPY

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This narrative discusses the human-canine relationship within the context of the family and explains how the family is one contributing factor in dog behavior. Described are problems associated with the characteristics of anthropomorphism and placing blame solely upon the dog. Strategies for eliminating the symptom include examining the pet within the context of the family and assessing the dynamic as it contributes to creating the symptom. For the pet professional operating from a cybernetics perspective, it may be beneficial to take on the role of "therapist" in order to enlighten and work on the problem with the family unit as a whole.

Underpinnings

The relationship between humans and dogs dates back at least 15,000 years. The dog is unique among domesticated animals in that it was the only species that voluntarily took its place as both partner and friend to humankind. Interestingly, Pugnetti (1980) suggests that dogs share similar social and behavioral structures with humans; this may explain why the bond between the two species developed with such ease and has endured over time. Throughout history, when the dog wasn't assisting people in the hunt, warning of danger, or performing any number of highly specialized jobs, the creature rested contentedly at the sides of its adoring humans. In modern times I believe that the relationship between dogs and people can best be characterized as one that provides mutual companionship. This is further evidenced in the growing body of scientific literature conducted in the area of the human-companion animal bond. In fact, Bulcroft (1990) notes that the vast majority of people consider their pets to be family members, and there may be little disagreement that the modern dog is an interrelated part of the human family or "pack" system in which it resides.

My 30 years of professional experience in the field of dogs has led me along the natural path of becoming an educator on the subject of the human-canine bond. In my roles as a professional lecturer, consultant, writer, and operator of a dog-related website, I have answered many questions from the members of the general public regarding the canine. On a number of occasions, I have been astonished by how little people seem to understand about

this creature that dwells so intimately within the human abode and sometimes even shares its master's bed. Over and over again it has been my experience that people tend to believe that a problem with the dog lies solely within the dog rather than looking at the bigger picture. These are the people who mistakenly believe that all dogs that suffer from separation anxiety are neurotic. They may wrongly think that every dog that soils in the house is dirty, or incorrectly assume that all dogs that jump on people when they walk through the door at the end of the day are simply rude. What these members of the human pack fail to realize is what many dog behaviorists believe to be true: the similarities that exist between canine and human social structures may indeed cause the dog to consider itself as much a part of the human pack as the humans consider the dog a part of the family. As such, the dog may be said to be a naturally interconnected part of the system in which each member provides, as Jacobson and Margolin (1979) describe, "...consequences for the other on a continuous basis" (p. 13). In other words, some problems with the dog may very well lie within the family as a system.

The current paradigm, which views the problem as residing incessantly and solely "within the dog," is exactly the sort of mindset that creates a barrier to relieving the symptom. Blaming the dog may create friction between the family members that could lead to one member isolating the symptomatic dog from the family pack by sweeping it off to obedience school. In the worst-case scenario, an incorrigible dog may cause the family to "get

rid of the problem” as evidenced by the fact that “up to 5 million unwanted dogs are killed each year. In 2001, some 50,600 dogs and cats entered New York City’s animal welfare system” (Katz, 2003, p. 63). For many of these disposable dogs, the answer to salvation may have simply resided in a therapeutic assessment of their family system.

Another characteristic of the current paradigm is the anthropomorphism, the endowment of human qualities on non-human companion animals, of the canine. Projecting human behavior on dogs and interpreting animal behavior by human definitions are familiar ways by which humans anthropomorphize their pets. Interpreting animal behavior by human definition is quintessentially depicted in the doggy “kiss.” Humans frequently understand the wet tongue of their dog across their face as an expression of love and affection. This interpretation may not be entirely correct, however, because most behaviorists believe that licking the face of a human by a dog has one of two meanings. As Coren (2000) explains, either the dog is asking for food, as it would have as a pup by licking the face of its mother so she would regurgitate nourishment, or the dog is expressing submission, as face licking acknowledges that the human is superior and the dog willingly accepts dominance.

Interventions and Strategies

Whenever I am approached about a dog that exhibits undesirable behavior, I do my best to examine the behavior within the context of the family. Frequently, I insist on making a home visit at a convenient time when all members of the family will be present so that I can observe the dog in its relational setting with the other members of its pack. Ultimately, dog behavior can be understood as the complex blending of a number of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as genetic predispositions, experiential history, and current circumstances. A popular school of thought among dog behaviorists suggests that a dog’s conduct can be mitigated through classic conditioning and may be considered a function of the animal’s ability to recognize and respond to patterns. In this model, the human pack may contribute

both knowingly and unknowingly to the establishment and maintenance of those patterns. Thus, when a dog engages in undesirable behavior, it may very likely be the reciprocal to incorrect conditioning by other members of the family. Allow me to illustrate this concept by providing an example from my own case experience.

A dog I’ll call “Doc” is a year-old, altered male, Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier residing in a one-dog household. The human pack consists of a married couple and their five-year-old daughter. The wife had contacted me with a series of complaints, one of which was that Doc constantly knocked down their daughter. The wife and her husband were afraid that the child might be seriously hurt. The wife was deeply attached to Doc, but her husband considered the dog a nuisance and would have liked to have given him up. A visit to the home for observation revealed that, among a laundry list of other hierarchal-defining activities, Doc habitually ran through doorways “bumping” into the legs of the two adults. I advised the family that the motion of the “shoulder bump” by Doc is one of the methods by which dogs are believed to assert dominance in the pack. By causing other members of the pack to “give way,” such as what happened when Doc hurled himself past humans who were about to pass through a doorway, the dog was likely establishing himself as the pack leader. Similarly, Doc may have deliberately “bumped” the couple’s toddler, knocking her down by chance, because his instinct might have compelled him to solidify his “alpha” status with every member of the entire pack. By educating the family and working with them using a behavioral approach, I was able to show how their behaviors were contributing to the symptom as well as how to adjust their behaviors to create a change in pattern significant enough to alleviate the symptom. The key to this approach is to involve the entire family. If every member of the family does not agree to participate in the therapy, then the success rate diminishes.

By way of another example, a dog I’ll call “Munch” is a nine-year-old recently (within the past six months) adopted Lhasa Apso that

lives as the only dog in a household with a single mother and her two teenage sons. When he was first adopted and when the mother was laid off from work, Munch always went to the bathroom outside and never made a mistake in the house. However, the mother has since returned to work. Subsequently, Munch seems to have "forgotten" his toilet training and is relieving himself on her antique oriental carpet whenever the mood strikes him. An in-home consultation revealed that, unrealized by the teenage boys, the mother is the only member of the family who regularly takes the responsibility of bringing Munch outside to relieve himself. She, however, now works long hours and sometimes does not get home until very late in the evening. On the rare occasions that one of the sons does happen to take Munch outside, the confused dog just stands there and does nothing. To alleviate the symptom in this case, it is vital that each of the family members commit to participating in the process. Munch needs to learn that he is expected to relieve himself when outside, regardless of which pack member brings him there. The pack members must also commit to giving their canine companion regular opportunities at reasonable intervals to relieve himself outside of the abode. Creating a new and consistent pattern in which every member of the family participates is the key to this behavior strategy.

Becvar and Becvar (2003) write, "...understanding how to solve problems requires understanding how problems are created and maintained" (p. 293). Symptom relief is the desired outcome. As someone concerned with the family dog in context, I can relate to their suggestion that "in a very real sense, the therapist might be referred to as an educator rather than a therapist because she seeks to have clients gain the knowledge and the skills to monitor their own behavior" (p. 241).

Because behavior can be very multi-dimensional, before I visit the home, I first ask the family to rule out the possibility of the symptom being the direct result of a physical health issue. A trip to the veterinarian might reveal that a dog may frequently urinate in the house because it has a recurring bladder

infection, has a kidney stone, or is incontinent. Upon making the house call, one of the first things I explain to the family unit is the fact that, although it might appear convincingly otherwise, the dog is not a person in a fur suit, but rather a distinct living entity that operates on many different levels than we humans do and needs to be recognized as such. The next things I explain are the various extrinsic and intrinsic qualities of the dog. I describe the human-canine continuum, I outline the various drives that motivate the dog, and I explain methods to synthesize all of this information. Essentially, I give the biped members of the family a crash course in Dogs 101 that will give them some insight into what makes their dog tick. At the beginning of the visit, I also attempt to learn as much about the history of the dog as possible and evaluate the animal for breed-specific traits as well as individual temperament and characteristics.

It must be understood that in the holistic paradigm, a particular behavioral problem may be very complex. The bossy attitude of a particular dog may be the result of not having properly learned about hierarchy in the litter and/or it may be related to a genetic breed-specific trait toward aggression. Poor diet and/or bad past experiences can also be factors that contribute to a particular behavior. Such behavioral tendencies may be triggered by or exacerbated through particular interactions within the family subsystem. Similarly, with the right relational dynamic in place within the family system, such behavioral tendencies might just as easily be avoided altogether or modified for the better.

After interviewing the family and observing the whole group in process, I point out what I recognize to be potential patterns of problematic behaviors that concern the dog. I then translate them, whenever possible, into what has been determined by experts in the field of dog communication to be "dog speak." My goal is to endow the family with the know-how to understand their relationship with their dog and to highlight how both their and their dog's behavior can mutually and simultaneously shape the dynamic of the family unit. Becvar and Becvar (2003) explain that Jacobson and Margolin assert, "...good

relationships are not problem free, but...their members have viable problem-solving skills" (p. 261).

Alleviating the symptom may begin simply as a matter of what Becvar and Becvar (2003) describe as "reframing" the problem. By explaining to a family that the dog jumping up on them at the front door is believed by behaviorists to be a method of greeting humans that mirrors that which dogs do by sniffing each other's faces, the family may become much more accepting of such behavior. Furthermore, this knowledge enables them to take the initiative to modify their own behavior by getting down to the level of their dog for greetings, which eliminates the problem of jumping up altogether. In other instances the appropriate intervention follows the paradoxical strategy, as in the case of the dog that urinates submissively. If the humans understand that this behavior may alternately be understood as a *compliment*, and that behaviorists agree that dogs think they are responding appropriately by physically acknowledging the human as leader, the human can then *accept* the behavior. Through this process of acceptance, the person then may *not* respond negatively (or at all, for that matter) to the dog. Consequently, the dog assimilates this new information, reciprocates, and the symptom disappears. Essentially, what both the human pack members and the dog need is what Becvar and Becvar (2003) explain as "meaningful noise" or "...new information that will allow them to see things differently and thus behave differently" (p. 300). More often than not, however, the most appropriate intervention merely "emphasizes enhancement of positive behavior rather than reduction of negative behavior" (Becvar & Becvar, 2008, p. 241).

Take, for example, the Maltese that barks incessantly every time the phone rings and continues to bark the entire time a family member holds a receiver to an ear in conversation. I suggest "setting the dog up" by arranging incoming telephone calls at a predetermined time and praising the dog lavishly for being quiet in the seconds before the telephone rings and for every moment of silence when the dog tries to catch its breath.

A thought among behaviorists is that the dog instinctively wants to please and will soon stop barking when it becomes understood that silence solicits praise. We humans must bear in mind that, although some dogs seem to do bad things non-stop, to many dogs, like with some children, receiving negative attention is better than receiving no attention at all. In these instances symptom relief may come when the family dishes out a little more positive feedback to humankind's best friend.

It is comforting to think that I may be helping to save a few dogs from the shelter through my educational approach. To be sure, however, the most rewarding part of my work is seeing its impact on the human members of the pack. Not only do they show a great deal of enthusiasm for my work as their dog begins to exhibit more socially desirable behaviors, but quite often they begin to function as a stronger and more efficient system when they learn what they can accomplish as interworking parts of a holistic paradigm. The husband who once wanted to turn Doc, the Wheaton Terrier, into the local shelter eventually developed a strong enough bond with the dog that he began to take his "buddy" on car rides to do errands. The husband's "aha moment" came when he began to understand the need to communicate with the family dog in a language that they both could understand. The wife, in turn, was happy not to be forced to give up the comfort of her beloved creature, and once she became confident in Doc's gentlemanly behavior around their daughter, she could focus more strongly on other aspects of mothering. Plus, she indicated that she was pleased by her husband's level of commitment and desire to work together through the "dog" problem. When I last visited the family, it was delightful to observe a blissful dog that appeared to be integrated into the context of the family. The giggles that I heard coming from the daughter as she played with Doc were enough to leave paw prints on any heart.

Conclusion

Although the dog has existed and evolved closely within the lives of human beings for more than 15,000 years, there seems to be a

great deal to be understood about the dog within the context of the family. Families, with the help of dog professionals, may be able to make a paradigm shift away from the tendency to place blame solely within the dog and trying to “correct” the dog by removing its behavior from the context in which it occurs. As has been suggested throughout this narrative, a better approach to relieving the “symptom” of the “bad” dog is to assess the canine within its “pack,” that is, within its human family. By becoming aware of what drives the dog and the process by which the dog learns appropriate behavior based upon body language and sounds, human members of the family may then foster a greater awareness of their own behavior. All members may come to understand how their behavior generates reciprocal behavior among all other parts of the organization, even the family dog. A systems approach tells us that when there is a change in the pattern, then there is a change in the behavior. This, in turn, leads to a change in the symptom. From a cybernetics perspective, some dog professionals may be called upon to act as “therapists” within the family unit as a whole. This integrative approach may eventually endow all of humanity with the possibility of answering the question that I so often pose to myself: “Are there really any *bad* dogs? Or are there just *unenlightened* owners?”

References

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Drew, the author's dog. Photograph by Tracie Laliberte-Bailey.

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