

TRAUMHOF GERMAN SHEPHERD DOGS Article Series

Understanding Your Puppy's Behavior

By Karen Priest

Every day I get calls and emails from dismayed puppy owners looking for advice on how to modify their puppy's unwanted (but normal) behavior. Most of them incorrectly hypothesize about what the puppy is thinking and why he is reacting the way he is.

In an effort to curb unwanted behavior, people turn to trainers, web articles and books for all sorts of magic bullet solutions. There are all sorts of products out there, guaranteed to transform your puppy into a better trained dog. There are collars, head halters, harnesses, and even "Special Methods."

Some of this plentiful advice is good advice; but much of it is either not the best solution, not a safe method, or is totally WRONG. For some reason, people prefer to use gadgets, physical force and dominance over less hostile and more effective methods. Folks; There is a reason that magic bottled elixirs fell out of favor over a hundred years ago!

I send articles home, and I post articles on the web site, but not everyone reads them. I lecture at class. But, not everyone listens. And yet, everyone asks the same questions and everyone is looking wide and far for different answers. Answers that will get results Now. Answers that require little work on the owners part.

There is no magic bullet. You must educate yourself, you must put time and work into your puppy and only then will you get great results.

In order to have a well trained and enjoyable dog, you must master the art of communication with your puppy. Communication is a two way street. You need to convey what you expect to your puppy, in a clear and understandable manner, and you also need to be able to LISTEN to what your puppy is telling YOU. You need to understand that his behavior is a result of what need motivates him in a given moment, and what emotion he is feeling.

Here are some important concepts:

*A Dog's Needs, & Thought are linked to his Emotional State. A Dog's Emotional State is lined to is Behavior.

*Dogs do Not Behave in a Way They Do Not Feel.

*Dogs do Not Lie.

*Not all Dominance is Aggression.

***Not all Behavior involving Nipping, Biting, Frustration is intentionally Aggressive.**

* When NORMAL puppy behavior is undesirable, you must teach your puppy the behavior you desire.
Mouthiness is NORMAL for puppies.

(Please see my article on NORMAL Puppy Behavior)

***You do not Have to Establish Dominance Over your Dog in order to Lead, communicate and Have him agree to Your Terms.**

Let me say that again : YOU DO NOT HAVE TO Dominate Your Dog. (And you should NEVER be engaging in “Dominance Rolls, where you pin your dog upside down in a “submissive position.” NEVER. with 16-20 Shepherds in my home at all times, I have NEVER had to resort to this silly, barbaric, and dangerous tactic.)

In other words, you can be a leader in the way a Captain leads a Team, but you don't have to be a harsh Dictator who oppresses. You can be a good boss vs. a boss who is horrible to work for. You can be a parent who establishes boundaries, but is fair and easily accessible.



Puppies/Dogs have basic needs that are prevalent in their emotions and thought, and thus their behavior.

Puppies need food, water, exercise, stimulation/investigation, play & social interaction. They need sleep, they need to eliminate, and they need to feel safe.

If a puppy FEELS pent up, in need of play and exercise, he behaves this way – in a way we might call “hyper” or frenetic. My Mom's normally quiet, snuggly “Lap dog” Bichon would go on what we called a “Tear” when we came home & she was let out of her crate. She would fly around the house at a speed -of -light run, leaping on furniture, racing round the sofa, grunting, wagging...it was like watching a swirling tornado! why was she “being hyper”? Because she felt pent up, and was releasing her energy in a most enthusiastic way. She did not have the self restraint to sit quietly when she felt so elated and was anticipating her upcoming routine walk.

If a puppy feels ill, he is not thinking about food or eating, nor is he interested in playing. If he FEELS sick with a belly ache, his behavior & thought mimics his emotive state. He plunks down listlessly, and behaves as he feels. We would say he "ACTS sick." Dogs do not "act". They reflect what they really feel. Behavior and thought are tied to the dog's emotions.

Much of a puppy's antics can be traced to a need, and the frustrated puppy trying to convey his need or desire. Puppies must learn the "rules of engagement" and must learn restraint. They must learn to sit still and stifle their gleeful jumping as they hope to hasten you to get shoes on and take them out to play. We need to teach the puppy that behaving in the way we want him to will result in his need being met.

As an example, when I was a teenager, I was the proud owner of a very messy room. I was busy spending time on things more important to me than cleaning up. After school, riding my horse was my number one priority.

One day, I came home and my mother was waiting for me. She told me that her cleaning lady had been unable to vacuum my room because all my belongings were littering the floor. My Mom told me that I was not going to ride my horse until the room was cleaned. I went right to work dutifully and cleaned my room so I could go ride.

It is your job to teach your puppy that the behavior less desirable to him (Sitting patiently) is the only route to what he wants (Going outside! or playing with you! or getting his dinner!). Once he understands, he will comply. If, in the puppy's estimation, the less desirable behavior leads to nothing good, he will not choose to repeat it.

This is how puppies "operate":

- *If a Behavior Leads to a Result that is Positive for Puppy, he is Likely to Repeat the Behavior.
- * IF a Puppy has an Unmet Need, he will Communicate This to You in His Behavior.

Here are some Situations that I Illustrate my point. These Situations are Commonly Presented to me by Puppy Owners as "Issues".



The owners think the puppy's behavior is bad, aggressive, mad, defiant. None of this is true.

*“When I try to sit on the sofa and watch tv, (You can also insert “When I talk on the phone” or “When I work at the computer”) the puppy won’t let me! He leaps up on me and nips at my legs (hands/ face/the sofa; insert your choice) It is as if he is saying “I don’t want you to watch tv.”

Then, when I push him off, he relentlessly comes back at me.”

OF COURSE HE DOES. Pushing him off and ignoring his needs is frustrating him even more. Think how frustrated You get when he appears not to “listen” to you!

Guess what? Your puppy is communicating with you, but you don’t understand his language. This is frustrating to him.

Has he been out to pee/poop? If so, has he had his dinner/drink? If so, has he had enough exercise/walk/play? If you answer No to this one – get up off your lazy butt and get this puppy doing some physical activity! You might not feel like walking after a long day, or on a cold night, but you OWE THIS PUPPY to meet his need for exercise. If you have done that, then it is most likely puppy is telling you that he wants your ATTENTION and interaction. He doesn’t want to be given a toy and told to go away! Spend 15 minutes playing WITH him. Then, give him a chewie and sit back on your sofa (make your call/ work on your computer.) If he is still insisting he needs you, and ALL his needs have been met, then you should crate him or xpen him or baby gate him in his area and give him a chewie. OR, remove yourself to work elsewhere. Give him a 10 minute time out. Try again. This may take several repetitions. It is imperative that you NOT get angry or upset or rough. No emotion, just cause/effect. Puppies can understand actions = consequences. Eventually they learn that bugging you while you are doing something is not going to get them what they want.

If you lean down, push puppy away, talk to him... you just gave him what he wanted .. your attention. You just trained him to keep persisting!



*“My Puppy Thinks I am a sheep”
Or

“My puppy is displaying dominant aggressive tendencies!”

This situation is also one that is recanted to me weekly, and the owners’ beliefs, above, are just two erroneous conclusions that owners have recently arrived at.

The situation:

“When I walk in my home, the puppy gets tangled in my feet, won’t let me walk, and bites my slippers, (insert your choice: grabs my pants legs/ ripped my pants/ bites my legs/ leaps up nipping my arms.) I am worried that this seems very aggressive for a young puppy. AND I read that dominant puppies get tangled in your feet while submissive ones trail behind you.”

Or, a similar version of the above situation, but this time the owner concludes:

“Does he think I am a sheep? Is he herding me?”

PEOPLE! Think like a dog! Dogs behave the way they feel & are motivated by needs!

What is your puppy doing?

(First, a word about Herding. The herding instinct is not confined to SHEEP. A puppy doesn’t have to think you are a sheep to herd you! Shepherd Dogs herd sheep, goats, horses, people.. whatever needs herding! If you are walking in a group in the wooded park and a child or elderly person in your group falls behind, the dog might circle back and “herd” them along to stay with the group.

But, when you are walking in your hallway, and he dive bombs your feet/legs(...unless you are wearing a lamb skin costume compete with sheep scent and uttering BAAHHHHH...) no I do not think he is herding you like a sheep!)

Puppies who do this are seeking attention and seeking to have a need met. They might be trying to get your attention, telling you they are teething and need a chewie, or that they hope you head to the kitchen b/c they are hungry, or they need to go out. This is often a very frustrated behavior. And just as often, becomes a fun game to puppy who succeeds in getting attention even if it’s negative attention.

What should you do?

*Ask yourself if puppy has a need to go out/eat/exercise. if all these are taken care of you can:

*Ignore it and keep walking with puppy attached to shoe.

*Interest puppy in something else.

*Carry a leash and treats, and at these moments, leash puppy and do a few obedience commands for praise and rewards. (Puppy in a sit = puppy who isn’t attached to slipper.)

*Remove puppy to crate as quickly and emotionlessly as you can.

*Make a hurt puppy squeak noise when he grabs on/bites. If he lets go and cocks his head like “Huh? You’re hurt?” you can then praise his releasing you and grab a toy and play with it with him.

Warning: If you reach down and roughly remove the little alligator and shove him away, scolding him, he will grow more frustrated and come back at you. I guarantee this will have the opposite effect from what you want, and will not discourage him!

This is NOT aggression. This is NOT a sign of dominance. In my opinion, the folks who preach that everything is about dominance and submission are wrong. I live with more dogs than most people. If more than two dogs constitute a pack, I have a large pack, with 16-20.

And I RARELY ever see dominance displays in my house. Most day to day dog behavior and emotion is not based on a need to dominate.

When one of my dogs jumps on the sofa with me, lays his head in my lap, flips over and asks for a belly rub... I am 100% sure the dog is not motivated by a need to be on equal "high up" ground with me nor a need to dominate me. The dog's behavior reflects a desire to be warm and safe, or to get relaxing attention/touch, or to settle in a comfy place to nap. When our dogs join us in our bed, sometimes a submissive dog takes the highest place, above my head on my pillows and the more pushy dog who got there last, settles for a place by my feet, lower down. No dominance contests there, either.

We invite our dogs to come be with us, and if they are causing us to have no room or be uncomfortable, we can ask them to go down. Our dogs NEVER growl at us.

Once in a while one might try to "play dead" because he doesn't want to lose his comfy resting spot.. but with reassurance from us that YES, we MEAN it, the offender will leave with no more than a sigh.

Further, Dominance and Aggression are not the same thing! A dog can exhibit dominance without being aggressive.

Next Situation:

***'My dog has to greet everybody and every dog he sees...he is so social that I can't hold him back!'**
or

"My dog does not like to meet new people. He likes some people, but not everyone. He also doesn't seem to like playing with groups of dogs at daycare or at the park. He plays fine with his friends, but he doesn't seem comfortable in big groups."

Not every puppy feels the need to be the life of the party, the homecoming queen, the class president.

Some puppies will never welcome new people and new dogs with ease and effusive warmth.

As long as your puppy is well behaved and tolerant, you should not ask him to be someone he is not.

Some humans are shy. These people are difficult to get to know, but once you befriend them, they are often truly wonderful individuals. Why can't we accept this in dogs? Not all dogs WANT to play at doggie daycare. It might make

US feel better about leaving them if we can imagine them playing all the day through, but the dog may be trying to tell us this is not his "thing".

Does it make him a bad dog? No.

Our job is to set up as many good experiences for this dog as we can, so he learns that he is safe, even if he isn't 100% happy about a situation.

Our job is to socialize the puppy on his own terms, and not force him to endure endless hands in his face or arms around him. We must be aware of his feelings and his anxiety and not overwhelm him with too much "space invasion." He must learn to tolerate people and dogs in his proximity, as he will need to be able to walk with you when people and dogs are present. He must be secure in your ability to keep him safe and not feel he must look out for himself and make decisions about who can approach him.

But, realistically, it is unfair to expect him to morph into someone he is not.

A client recently came to my class with an exceptionally well trained dog. The owner had obviously worked hard, and the dog was truly a star pupil. He obeyed every command happily, and looked at his owner attentively. When other dogs came close to him, he was worried. It took a lot of effort, but he trusted that he was safe by his owner's side, and he maintained his down, his stay, whatever exercise we were doing. When I walked close by, he again told me (with his body language) that he was worried. He did not engage in aggressive displays. He didn't lunge, bark, growl. And I respected his feelings and did not stare at him, reach for him, invade his space. I didn't pressure him more than he could handle. I tossed a few cookies in his direction. When he took them and approached me for more, I held the treats in a flat hand, kneeling near him, looking away from him. We worked slowly, and by the next class, I could take his lead, feed him treats and he was willing to sit and down for me. I was able to scratch under his chin and tell him how great he was.

It is important that his owner can walk near people - and we all know that people can be unpredictable and COULD reach for the dog. So, we need to know the dog can handle that. But we don't need to have tons of folks gushing and hugging him, violating his personal comfort zone and touching him. He just doesn't want that.

Can you sympathize with his plight?

Imagine you are a female, out with friends at a bar. There is a man on a bar stool next to you. He keeps trying to catch your eye, He is smiling, winking, leaning toward you. You think "EWWWWW... CREEPY", and you turn your back to him.

You are speaking in body language, just like a dog does!

Your body language says GO AWAY.

You give your friends the eye and try to show them that you think this guy is creepy and he is bugging you.

Creepy guy does not register body language.

Next, he moves closer. He tries to ask if he can buy you a drink. You pretend you do not hear him.

He leans closer still, and he does a very rude thing! He drapes an arm over you very familiarly, and hugs you as he slurs and whispers in your ear!

What do you do?

If you are very well mannered, trying to keep composed and minimize the fuss, you might say "Excuse me, I am happily married, and I am not interested." And wait until he backed off, before moving as far away as you could.

If the female in question was ME, the guy might get smacked! Or at least a tongue lashing. Touching me is crossing the line!

I might lose my temper!

Sort of similar to a dog growling or snapping!

The dog feels much like the female in the bar.

Conversely, the dog who simply can not pass up an opportunity to socialize is equally problematic. These dogs drag owners where they don't want to go. Often their "Greetings" are conceived by other dogs as rude or pushy, and other dogs might not react well. The owner says "He is very social and he only wanted to play!" But, FiFi the white Standard Poodle dog who just pinned him down and gave him a lesson in manners was not pleased by his rude space invasion.

These "friendly" dogs are often the target of other dogs' reprimands.

These dogs also frequently display "selective hearing" and ignore their owners pleas and calls to come away from a group of playing dogs. A social dog is highly motivated by playful group behavior. He simply can not bring himself to choose the behavior you want over the more self reinforcing, more motivating activity.

The party animal dog usually bestows all humans with sloppy kisses, jumps up at them in his exuberance, and demands patting, demands that you SEE him and acknowledge. He brings your mother in law (the dog hater) his yucky ball and keeps nudging her with it until she throws it for him.

IF she ignores him, he drops it in her lap, on her silk pants. He is convinced she is his new best friend.

This dog must learn that "good" behavior will earn him play time. Sitting will earn him greetings, ball throws, treats.

He must have boundaries established and enforced.

He will always be social, but he must override his desire to meet and greet with learned restraint.

***The final scenario I want to address is the dog who begins to "act up" on an on leash walk, when encountering a person or another dog they didn't expect.**

The solution to this problem requires more of an explanation than I can provide here. I have a separate article on this subject, for those who are interested.

However, I will briefly address the issue here because it is frequently presented to me by puppy owners.

“I was walking Fido on our street at dusk, and a neighbor was walking towards us on the other side of the street. Normally, we don’t see anyone, but Mr. Baker has taken up walking. Fido saw him and at first he ran back against my legs and put his hackles up and then he barked. I asked him what was wrong, tried to reassure him that it was just Mr. Baker.. but Fido just got more noisy and was jumping up like he wanted to get at Mr. Baker! T

Mr. Baker crossed the street and gave me a dirty look. I was embarrassed. The rest of the way home Fido looked over his shoulder in the direction of Mr. Baker.

The next night, I saw Mr. Baker before Fido saw him. I was hoping we would not see him, but there he was! I shortened the leash and asked Fido to sit, but when he saw Mr. Baker he barked again, and he got up and refused to sit again. I corrected him sternly, but Fido ignored me and pulled me very hard as he leaped up, barking. Mr. Baker was walking closer to us because we were nearer to his house tonight. Fido got really upset and the closer Mr. Baker came, Fido got more unruly. Mr. Baker went up his driveway and I pulled Fido away, but now he watches for Mr. Baker when we walk every night! He is acting very dominant and aggressive.”

This dog exhibited a range of behavior and emotion. The owner did a few things incorrectly. (Positively reinforced the outburst in an effort to reassure, tightened the leash and tensed up, corrected a dog who was asking for guidance.) And this dog is NOT acting in a dominant or aggressive way.

He is acting ANXIOUS and FEARFUL (Evidenced by leaning into owner, hackles, startled woof.) and also upset at having to make a decision about what to do to protect himself and owner.

Similarly, there are dogs who react to other dogs with similar behavior – usually based on fear.

There is a solution to this problem, but it is not a quick fix.

This sort of behavior becomes quickly habit. It is similar To Mailman Syndrome.

What is Mailman Syndrome?

Dog is resting on sofa, where he can see out to the walkway. Owner is at work. Mailman (= intruder) comes up walk. Dog lifts head, sees this, erupts in crazy barking. Mailman drops mail, retreats. Dog thinks “HEYYYYYY, I got him to leave!” Next day, he barks, mailman leaves. Behavior is now routine. Dog believes it is his job to deter the thug. Dog notes that his barking is an effective solution that leads to the desired result.

Fido in the situation above is pretty sure his WOOFs led to Mr. Baker’s retreat. Scary surprise stranger leaving = good

news to Fido. Likelihood behavior will be repeated = strong.

In summary; Dogs behave in a way that reflects how they feel and think. They also try to communicate to their humans, but are often frustrated by our lack of understanding.

Improving your communication and "listening" skills will help you to develop a well trained dog!

The best trainer reaches into his tool bag and selects different tools for different dogs and different behaviors. Most dogs are not looking for trouble. They do not want to dominate you or be dominated. They are not "aggressive" as often as they are expressing confusion, anxiety and fear.

They are not biting aggressively as often as they are teething or using normal puppy means of releasing frustration. (To release anxiety, dogs chew.)

They are not "acting" hyper as much as they are looking for an outlet of stored up energy.

For more information on how your puppy thinks, check the website for articles and references on the subject.

Articles are added and updated frequently.