

# The Emotional Dog

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Imagine that your neighbors have a lovely five-year-old daughter, Mara. A month ago there was a severe thunderstorm with sharp lightning and loud thunderclaps during the night. Mara was startled and frightened and went into her parents' room to sleep. Since that time there have been several more thunderstorms and Mara has become frightened and clingy. Now each time there is a rainstorm, she asks to sleep with her parents, but they do not want her sleeping with them so often. You have successfully raised 10 children, so your neighbors ask your advice about how to handle this.

You have several options to suggest. First, you could suggest that they spank her and send her back to her own bed. Second, you could tell them that they should allow her to sleep in their bed whenever she asks. Third, you could suggest that they completely ignore any of her efforts to get into their bed and give her attention, praise, and hugs only when she bravely stays in her own bed during a storm. Fourth, you could suggest that they calmly comfort her in her own bed but stop short of allowing her to sleep in their bed.

For most of us, the first option would be unimaginable. In addition to being ineffective and unkind, spanking a frightened child would only increase her fear and distress, leading to an even worse and more intractable problem. The second option does not seem wise. Allowing Mara to sleep in her parents' bed whenever she asks is likely to increase the amount of time she sleeps with them, and they have already said they would not want that. The third option is getting closer to the operant conditioning approach most of us know and love, but it still seems strangely unsatisfying as a solution to Mara's problem. Even though the goal is to help Mara stay in her own bed during storms, this option seems to lack compassion for her genuine feelings of fear. The fourth option seems more reasonable because it keeps Mara in her own bed while reassuring her and calming her fears. You suggest to her parents that they spend a little time in Mara's room when she is distressed by storms, pull the shades, turn on some music to muffle the storm sounds, give her a hug, and sit on the bed while calmly reading an interesting story to her until she relaxes.

This example highlights a dilemma we often face as dog trainers, with some of our own dogs as well as those of our clients. Mara was experiencing a strong emotion—fear—that led to an unwanted behavior. When she was afraid, she headed for her parents' bedroom. Her parents needed to work with her behavior as well as the underlying emotion that was driving it. Was Mara being manipulative? No—she was afraid. Her parents had to find a way to satisfy her underlying motivation (i.e., to feel more secure when frightened) while preventing a behavior problem from developing (i.e., Mara sleeping in their bed every night).

For years, animal (and human) behaviorists focused only on external behaviors while other scientists denied that animals even had feelings. We did not have the means



of learning what might be going on in animal minds at that time, and as a result, the emotional reactions of animals were either ignored or negated. Now all of that has changed. In the 1980s, applied behavior analysts began looking at animals' motivations for their behaviors (Burch & Bailey, 1999). Cognitive ethologists (Bekoff, 2007) and neuroscientists (Panksepp, 2005) have shown that animals do have an inner emotional life to an extent that most scientists now accept this fact. At the 2010 APDT conference, Temple Grandin showed research as far back as the 1960s that also demonstrated clearly that animals have emotions, but the climate was not conducive to exploration of this area at that time. Knowledge and science change over time. For example, until the 1970s and the groundbreaking work of psychiatrist Lenore Terr (1990), most people believed that children were too young to be traumatized. Now we know better. Children are much more vulnerable to trauma than adults.

Emotions are central to the existence of even primitive species. The fight/flight reaction is at base an emotional one fueled by neurochemicals in the brain and nervous system that influence the animal's behavior to preserve its survival. For social animals, positive emotions related to joy, touch, and play help bind families, packs, and herds together (Fleisherfilm, 1999).

As I listened to the wonderful presentations at the APDT Conference in Atlanta, I had a bit of a *déjà vu* experience. The fascinating research about canine cognition and emotions shared by several presenters brought back my own path in human psychology. I started out mostly as a behaviorist because those methods were clear and effective, but soon learned the value of cognitive therapy (how people's thoughts and attributions influence their emotions and behavior), and eventually studied play therapy and family therapy, approaches that gave me an added attentiveness to people's feelings and ways of creating safe and accepting environments for change. *[continued on next page]*

As multidisciplinary canine studies expand our understanding of our unique and amazing companions, our methods and ways of thinking about dog training and behavior consultation are changing, too. We have seen already the strong shift away from using dominance-based methods because we have learned that dogs *do* feel pain and have emotional reactions, and that forceful methods often increase dogs' anxiety and fear, making the situation worse (Herron, Shofer, & Reisner, 2009). Furthermore, it is likely that we will all be doing things a little differently in 10 years, as we continue to learn about the complexities of the canine mind.

This does not mean that positive behavioral approaches will disappear. Operant conditioning has endured because it works to help dogs learn new behaviors and replace unwanted behaviors with more appropriate ones. But dogs are not mechanistic automatons. They have cognitions and emotions that give them a rich inner life and shape their outward behavior. The good news is that our understanding is growing rapidly. The "bad" news is that our jobs are becoming more complex as a result.

### Canine Emotions

We know that dogs experience emotions, and they are responsive to our emotions. We probably wouldn't love them so much if there weren't some emotional interplay between us. But it goes beyond our "sense" that they have this capacity—neurobiological studies have revealed the brain structures and neurotransmitters responsible for dogs' emotional experience (McConnell, 2006; Panksepp, 2005). The interesting thing is that the parts of the canine brain involved in regulating emotions are nearly identical to ours!

### Helping Dogs with Emotional Reactions

There are canine equivalents of the Mara example I started with. Dogs have negative or fearful emotional reactions that undergird unwanted behavioral reactions. We don't want to reinforce the undesirable behaviors, but does that mean we have to completely ignore the dog's feelings? Certainly not. It is important to remember that we cannot reinforce emotions, only behaviors. Emotions are there because they are a natural, normal, biologically-based response. Negative emotions such as fear or anxiety are the dog's reaction to a startling or dangerous stimulus or some characteristic, situation, or item that has become *associated* with a dangerous or unpleasant stimulus. A colleague's young dog was recently surrounded by a group of curious adolescent boys on bicycles and was visibly frightened before my colleague could ask the boys to give the dog some room. After this incident her dog showed fearfulness and avoidance whenever he saw boys or bicycles.

Although we could use an operant approach to reinforce the dog for sitting still in the vicinity of boys on bikes, that approach is unlikely to help the dog's emotional state of fear. We might change the external behavior so the dog is not running away, but what is happening internally for the dog? (Some of you will recall Suzanne Clothier's slide during her Treat-Retreat presentation at the conference that

had pictures of a snake, a spider, and a frightening clown. Although we can try to distract ourselves or our dogs from a frightening stimulus, we—and they—still know it is there!). Ignoring a dog's significant fear and focusing *solely* on changing the dog's external behavior is actually denying the dog's reality. It does not reduce the fear and only teaches the dog to cover up the signs (behaviors) of fear. In order to truly overcome canine problems caused by strong negative emotions like fear, we have to (a) alter the dog's environment so it is not exposed to the fearful stimuli temporarily, (b) build a new, more positive association with the feared object or situation (conditioned stimulus) so that it no longer elicits fear, and (c) do these things within the context of a safe, secure relationship.

### *Altering the Environment*

While the first option—to alter the dog's environment—is a method of management, it also might represent a form of compassion. If a hospital visitation dog shows continued signs of distress each time she is at the medical center, perhaps due to the medicinal odors or equipment wheeling by, does she really need to continue visiting? The kinder option might be to find a different context in which she can work. If the root of the dog's problem is emotional, we usually must start by restructuring the environment for the dog. We do this not only to prevent the dog from practicing avoidant or unwanted behaviors, but more importantly, so the dog doesn't have to experience high levels of anxiety and fear. If our children were afraid of horror movies, would we keep taking them to see them?

As I was writing this paragraph, a strong windstorm developed. All five of my dogs became highly aroused by the sight of a loose plastic bag blowing repeatedly past the window, caught in a circular wind current. It was dusk and the light from the farm next door gave the bag a rather ghostly appearance. The dogs didn't settle down because this "intruder" continued to swirl within sight. My first attempt to alter the environment involved going out into the pouring rain to try to catch the bag. I'll spare you the details, but the bag was flying too high, I got soaked, and my dogs quickly lost faith in my ability to ward off UFOs. I then found a more sensible way to alter the environment—I simply let them go into another room where they could not see outside. The dogs quickly seemed more comfortable with the change of venue, as indicated by the significant reduction of pouncing, backing up, howling, growling, and frantic barking.

### *Building Positive Associations: Classical Conditioning*

The second option involves the use of classical conditioning to help the dog build more positive associations and overcome the fearful reaction. The use of counterconditioning and desensitization is most appropriate to reduce the actual emotions of fear or anxiety (see [www.fearfuldogs.com](http://www.fearfuldogs.com) for more on this). If the feared stimulus is continually paired with extra high value reinforcers that are given only when that stimulus is present, the dog eventually realizes that the stimulus signals something good rather than bad. It is important >

that the dog remains below threshold of reactivity, and this is usually accomplished by creating distance from the source of the dog's fear. My colleague asked some neighbor boys to ride their bikes in a nearby field each day after school. She started by keeping her dog 100 yards away (to keep him below threshold) and gave him chicken immediately whenever he noticed the boys. She has gradually been able to move the dog to within 30 yards before he shows signs of reactivity, and the boys have become eager to help her continue the process until the dog's fear of them is gone. This process is important because her dog regularly encounters boys on bikes in the neighborhood. In my own example, I did not need to use this process because the flying bag is probably a one-time occurrence.

### *Building a Safe, Secure Relationship*

In play therapy with children, or counseling in general, the therapist aims to create a safe and accepting environment where clients can relax sufficiently to deal with the difficult emotions and thoughts related to their problems. Only when they feel emotionally (and physically) safe can they work through their difficulties and begin to shift nonproductive behavior patterns. If any of us went to a therapist who criticized us and told us to "grow up and get over it," we would be crazy if we went back a second time! Dogs with emotionally-driven behavior problems are able to learn and change their behaviors more quickly if the negative emotions, often fear, anxiety, or frustration, are handled with kindness and sensitivity first.

The relationships we create with our own dogs and those our clients create with theirs really do matter. They provide the context in which all change occurs. Suzanne Clothier's (2002) emphasis on relationship regardless of which positive training method is used is spot-on in my view. At the core of most relationships—for humans and canines alike—are emotions. On this foundation we build the framework of our relationships through mutual respect, empathy (seeing the dog's point of view), reciprocity, and benevolent, humane leadership. When dogs are having anxious or fearful reactions, we need to evaluate for wrinkles in the relationship, but we can also draw upon the strengths of the relationship to help the dog calm down and feel safer. There are a number of ways to do this:

1. Anticipate situations that might be stressful for the dog and watch carefully for the dog's communication signals.
2. If the dog signals considerable anxiety or stress, back up until their reactivity diminishes or remove them from the situation.
3. Provide leadership in a kind, calm, matter-of-fact manner. If we get too aroused ourselves or go overboard comforting, the dog might become even more reactive because we've shared our own anxiety.
4. When the problem behavior is rooted in an emotional cause, help the emotional side of the problem first (classical conditioning; building positive associations). This might eliminate the behavioral problem entirely, but if it doesn't, use positive reinforcement and other operant training methods afterward.

5. Provide reassurance through touch, especially if the dog seeks it and only if the dog accepts it. Touch can be an important way of calming the anxiety and fear. Soothing sensory experiences can help quiet the autonomic nervous system that is engaged in the charged emotional reaction. Furthermore, the oxytocin research (Olmert, 2009) has shown that when we pet our dogs their levels of oxytocin rise, just as ours do. Oxytocin is an attachment neurotransmitter/hormone, and it is believed to play a large role in helping mammals overcome fear. It helps with the "approach" in approach-avoidance conflicts. As one of my dogs barked furiously at the UFO invading our back yard, paced wildly around the room, and then ran under my desk, leaned against my legs, and panted heavily while still barking periodically, I stroked her. She turned to me with wide eyes and wagged the tip of her tail just a little. And she stopped barking. I had not reinforced her barking; I had comforted her and helped calm her anxiety!

The UFO has now landed in the driveway, so I'm heading back out to regain my reputation as Protector of the Pack. Wish me luck!

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