

Our Changing Attitudes about Animals

by Deirdre Chitwood

W*e are in a time of radically changing views where pet care is concerned. We are moving into a time of progressive thinking where the old approach to animal training of fear and dominance is being overtaken by attitudes of respect and understanding, which are not only more effective in influencing animal behaviour but are also more morally correct.*

Thankfully we are beginning to appreciate animals in their own right, and to realise that their reason for being here on this planet may be more profound than being in service to the human race. Of course, this calls for a great deal of humility on our part and the ability to be able to surrender our old ideas of control and suppression. Slowly we are beginning to move forward in a new way, realising that working with and in harmony with our animals will effect real and lasting changes in their behaviour. In the place of pain and punishment we are learning that building a bond of trust borne out of patience and compassion is the only ethical way to proceed.

We are coming to realise that many of the same ingredients that are necessary to forge a meaningful and lasting relationship person to person are also true when it comes to our pets. This starts with learning to observe and listen to them and not assuming that they are the ones that need to change their behaviour and that we are the ones that are in the right. It is an animal's very nature to want to please us and if they refuse or are hesitant we are either not communicating with them well enough or they have a very good reason that we have not yet perceived. If we take the trouble to look a little more closely we will find that their behaviour is mostly based on either some deep-seated fear, insecurity or lack of confidence or on ill health.

As the being with a capacity for superior intelligence, we have a moral responsibility to try to understand animals and to offer all the protection and kindness that we can muster. There is so much for us to learn if we can only drop our own psychologies of fear and needing to have all the answers long enough to look at what is really going on in our relationship with our pets. It is so easy to put our own human psychologies onto our pets as a way to understand them, with ideas such as 'he wants to take over', 'he only does that to annoy me' or 'she is spoilt', when in reality animals really don't have intelligence that thinks this way. They are just not that complicated. What they do have is a huge amount of love, loyalty, willingness to try, and a fairness of spirit that often goes far beyond what we have to offer.

Whenever we catch ourselves coming up with labels for animal behaviour such as 'aggressive', 'submissive', 'dominant' or 'separation anxiety', we need to stop and think. The minute we put a label on something we feel safe and then we stop trying to work out for ourselves what we think is actually taking place. There are so many views and opinions in the world where pet care is concerned it is often difficult to know where to begin. One good place is to 'treat your best friend as you would want to be treated' which is a Tellington TTouch canine golden rule. Another is the mindset that 'we have the opinions and they have the facts'.

Also we can realise that the way we are is the single most direct and powerful external influence on our animals. If we change our behaviour it will change our pet's behaviour, which is a wonderful tool if we have the desire and the ability to do it. Perhaps it is our level

of stress that is stressing out our cat and causing it to urinate for apparently no reason outside of its litter box. Perhaps it is our lack of attention to our dog that is causing it tear up the furniture when we are not there. Or it may be that your ‘Yorkie’ constantly asks to be put in your lap – which has now become a nuisance to you – because you were forever picking him up and putting him there as a puppy. The examples are endless.

Often it takes someone outside of the circumstance to see the objective truth of a situation and to take a hand in helping both the carer and the pet. A remedy and way forward will not come from hanging on to old ideas of pet training that force an animal to change its behaviour because of fear of pain or reprimand. Neither will it come from trying to do the same things over and over again and wondering why you are not getting a different result. Observing and listening to what the animal is trying to tell you will take a little practise, but is far more humane as well as effective in determining a positive outcome. It also goes a great deal further towards building a meaningful relationship which is, after all, why you decided to have a pet in the first place, and will deepen trust and your connection with your pet rather than undermine it.

So often we try to do things the hard way, to force things into the way we think they should be or have been taught they should be, when a little easement is all that is needed. A good example of this is the way we hold on tightly to our dog’s leash and then wonder why he pulls. Every force has an equal and opposite reaction and the more we pull and tense our body, the more the dog will pull in response. Perhaps also he is trying to get away from us because he doesn’t like the way we are treating him. Sometimes all the dog may need is a loose leash and a more relaxed body posture by the handler.

Another very important way that we can help our dogs is to take pressure off the neck. This can be done by using a harness and by letting the dog off the leash whenever it is safe to do so. Having tightness around the neck causes a dog to feel that it is being choked – as it does us – which is a stressful experience. Add to this the stress of not being able to get away or respond in a way that he feels he needs to and you further compound the dog’s feelings of anxiety. Giving an animal choices decreases anxiety. The more in control they feel, the less anxious they will be. There are many ways to address behaviour issues which are practical and humane that work with the animal’s natural behavioural responses rather than against them.

There is always a reason why animals do what they do, and if we try to understand what that is we can be proactive in bringing about a positive outcome rather than being reactive to it. To work towards building a bond of trust with our pets means becoming responsible for the consequences of our actions when dealing with them; and this is at all times not just when it is convenient to us. Remember you are training your pet every minute of the day that you are with him, not just when you have decided ‘to have a training session’.

World Copyright © Deirdre Chitwood 2008. All rights reserved.

