

The Power of Choice

“The animal gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear, they are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other Nations caught with ourselves in the net of life and time.”

(Henry Beston)

When I sat down to write about this subject, I realized it was such a huge area that I did not know where to begin. So, I thought, what in my mind is the most important thing about choice? After some deliberations what I came to was, we live on a planet where we are offered a myriad of possibilities, so being born with an ability to choose or select is fundamental to life. Animals, like humans, are affected in every way – mentally, emotionally and physically – by their ability to choose or not choose. Therefore, it must be as much a natural prerogative for animals as it is with us.

How is it then that we do not, in the main, extend this same privilege to animals in our care? We know that taking away choice for humans, such as in prison, is considered a form of punishment yet we think nothing of micro-managing the lives of our pets. We choose what part of the house they can go in; where they can sit or lie; where, what and when they can eat; when they can go out and where they can go when they do go out, and for how long. There is a saying, “If you want to understand another man, walk in his moccasins”. My version of this saying is, “If you want to understand your pet, walk in his paws”.

So take a few minutes and try to imagine being your pet. Imagine being in receipt of your commands and demands, of eating the food you offer them, the same food day after day after day, in the same bowl. Next time you take your dog for a walk on a lead think, does he get to choose where he sniffs and for how long, and with which dogs he can interact? This is, of course, not to say that we do not need to manage and make certain rules where our pets are concerned for their safety and ours. It is just a gentle nudge for you to take a peep behind the curtain of living your life as your pet and to see where perhaps the balances may need adjusting.

So how does the ability to choose affect us and our animals? The more we can choose the less subjective we feel. With the ability to choose comes confidence, and thinking processes begin to engage. With lack of choice we feel out of control and this can lead to stress, feelings of fear and depression. There is a power in choice.

Several experiments were conducted in the latter half of the twentieth century that showed that a lack of control also produces increased stress in animals just as it does in humans. They also proved that increased stress leads to a compromised immune system and to ailments such as depression, asthma, colds and flu, heart disease, stomach ulcers, post-traumatic stress disorder, eczema and other skin disorders. Excessive stress can impede learning and shuts down the ability to think. Many so called ‘behavioral issues’ can be directly related to stress, such as excessive barking, reactivity, chewing objects, fooling around, possessiveness and even urination

problems. Choice is particularly important in situations involving fearful behaviour, aggressive behaviour and anxious behaviour.

Picture yourself at the dentist, if suddenly the dental nurse strapped you to the chair and the dentist forced your mouth open. You did not have the choice to get away or to stop them if they hurt you. How would that feel? Fortunately, most dentists these days realize we need to feel in control and will suggest you raise your hand if you want him to stop. Your pet, however, probably does not have this luxury at the vet or the groomers. Add to this the memory of something painful having happened to them on previous visits and you have a recipe for an extremely stressful experience. How less stressful would it be if the animal could have more control in that situation and say, "Stop", "Back off", or "That is a little too much"?

The best techniques shift control from the environment to the animal. For example, when introducing your dog to nail clipping, the best way is to allow him to move his paw away when he wants to. With the help of treats and a lot of patience initially, you can teach your dog that having his nails clipped is not an experience to be avoided at all costs. Begin by gently touching his paws and claws with your hands until he becomes used to you touching them in a respectful way. Gradually, introduce him to the clippers by stroking them gently on his paws. Rather than having an agenda, clip only as many claws as he feels comfortable with on any of his four paws. If you only manage one claw on one day and another on another, that's fine. As soon as he realizes he is in control and that you are listening to him, his trust in you will increase.

Allowing animals to choose is an integral part of the Tellington TTouch Method. As a practitioner I do not try to control the animal, I aim to encourage the animal how to have self-control. We do this by giving them new experiences that inspire their self-confidence. One way that we teach puppies how to be on a lead is by putting a long rope through the back ring of a step-in harness and with one person either side of the dog we walk them slowly round a series of obstacles. We also use this technique with dogs who are reluctant to go on a lead, have separation concerns, freeze, are nervous or lean against the lead. It is especially useful for owners who tend to micro-manage their dogs on a lead. As the line is not fixed, the opposition response is lessened and the dog will come into his own physical balance very quickly, which eliminates pulling on the lead and increases self-confidence.

Whenever I begin to touch an animal I am not familiar with, I start with the back of my hand, which is less invasive. I will only touch them for three or four seconds and then stop to see if the animal moves away or stays with me. I give them the choice as to whether they want to be touched or not. Indeed with cats, especially ones I do not know, I will sit down on the floor and provide the space for them to choose to come to me. I may make encouraging signals or try to entice them with a toy or a treat if they don't, but I will never try to confine a cat and I will only ever start by having one hand touching them. If the animal doesn't want to be engaged, then I leave it for another day. Perhaps they are not feeling well. I am sure they have their reasons.

Once you begin to understand how important choice is to the happiness levels of your pet, you will begin to find ways to introduce more choice into their lives. Food is very important to



animals. I live with four cats and I offer them a variety of food. I rotate the food on different days, and sometimes I put two or three types of food in one bowl. One day one cat will like one thing and not another, so I move the bowls from one cat to another. Some cats like certain shaped bowls better than others, and they

all have different places in the house where they like to eat. I always provide at least two kinds of dry food so they have a choice.

It is best to always provide at least one more litter box than you have cats so they always have a choice of which litter box to use. Even if you have one cat, let him have the choice of two litter boxes. One may not smell good to him that day. Yes, it does make for more work but they will be a lot happier as a result. I also feel it helps to offset what they have given up by living in our homes. After all, they did not choose to become domesticated.

Another example of how I offer choice to my cats is I never disturb my cats if they are sleeping on my bed. I do not order them off the bed. I simply make the bed around them and then when I come back in the room, they have always chosen to move onto the part of the bed I have made, allowing me to make the rest. With all animals, having a quiet, safe place to retreat to when they want to is essential and helps to relieve stress. I firmly believe animals want to do what you want them to do, you just need to communicate it to them.

If you want to take talking to your pet and giving choices to another level try asking them, "What do you want?" "Are you hungry?" "Do you want to go out?" Open your mind and see what answers you get back. With practice you will find a whole new world of communication opening up between you and your pet.

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