

The Relationship between Love and Behavior (What's Love have to do with it)

We bring dogs into our homes and make them part of our families primarily because of love. It doesn't matter if we got Rover from a reputable breeder after doing lots of research or if we adopted him from one of the many rescue groups or shelters. We most likely did it for love.

People LOVE dogs. Dogs are non-judgmental. They don't care how much money we have, or how much stuff we own. They don't care what we look like, what we do for a living or who we know. We love interacting with dogs. There are well documented studies regarding the benefits, both physical and psychological, of having a canine companion. We love playing with them, petting them and doing all sorts of activities with them.

Dogs enjoy and benefit from the relationships as much as we do. The love aspect is vastly important; without it the relationship would not be very satisfying for either dogs or people. But, we typically do not think about the correlation between love and behavior.

A basic tenet of behavior is that animals, including both people and dogs, will repeat behavior that rewards them in some way and will not repeat behavior which does not. This is the basis of almost every dog training system. Love, for most people and dogs is a powerful reward. But we often don't view love in that manner. When and how we love them does have an impact on their behavior. A look at some situations will illustrate the point.

I worked with a couple who have a ten week old Labradoodle named Tebow. Tebow is a cute fluffy puppy. There is no way you can even look at him without smiling; it was love at first sight for his family. They would sit on the couch watching TV or in a chair reading a book and he would bounce over to them, look up and put his paws up on their legs. They would look down, see his happy little face with the tongue drooping out the side, then reach down and pet him and while saying something like "Hi buddy, what are you up too? You're so cute". Just as often they might even reach down, scoop him up in their arms and give him lots of kisses.

What were they teaching Tebow? In this situation they were teaching little Tebow that it's ok to interrupt them when they're busy, and demand their attention. They were also teaching him that jumping on people is good behavior. That might not be a big deal when he's a little pup, but behavior that he learns as a pup will carry over when he's full grown.

I worked with another couple with a Great Dane named Brutus. Brutus would attack them and anyone else who entered their home. It was not an aggressive attack, it was a "happy to see you, give me attention" attack. He would jump on people, put his paws on their shoulders and lick their faces. Brutus weighs one hundred and fifty pounds and didn't know his own size. Without meaning to he would knock people over or rip their clothes. He actually broke the woman's arm by jumping on her.

They had brought Brutus home when he was an eight week old puppy. He was much smaller then. When they arrived home from work at the end of the day they would happily greet him as soon as they got home. "Hi Brutus! How was your day? Did you miss us?" with a happy and excited tone of voice. They would pet him and scratch behind his ears. He would get excited and lick and jump on them and they would all laugh and start playing together. Brutus grew up, but he had learned early on that people rewarded him for jumping on them. He thought people wanted him to be excited when they came in.

I worked with a woman whose ten year old Lab mix Sophie gets stressed and frightened when she hears thunder in the distance. As a storm gets closer Sophie becomes more and more

stressed until she becomes frantic. The woman had done the natural thing for people to do when someone they love is in distress. She comforted Sophie. She would get on the floor with her, pet her and tell her "Don't worry, it's only noise, I won't let anything happen to you."

Sophie however didn't understand the words nor the love in the way intended. She heard "Good girl, you're right to be scared." Dogs don't instinctively understand our words, they understand our tone of voice and a soft comforting voice, especially in addition to petting will be interpreted as praise. Remember that behavior that is rewarded will be repeated. Sophie's fears got worse and worse because they were rewarded.

Not only will the behavior be repeated, but often it will intensify. We worked with a woman whose rescued Shepherd mix Max was scared of men. When we arrived Max was barking at me. The woman meant well and tried to comfort Max. She petted him and said, "It's ok Max these nice people are here to help." Max didn't understand the words, but took the comforting to mean he was doing the right thing. He became more and more upset until he was growling fiercely and was ready to attack me. We were able to help her and Max turn things around and by the end of the session Max actually came over and put his head in my lap for me to pet. His whole body showed relief. So did hers.

There are a lot of great dogs in rescue groups and shelters. Often times these dogs didn't have a good previous life. It's human nature to want to "make up" for their prior situations. How do we typically do that? Usually we give them an abundance of love. Love is a crucial component of our relationship, but again when we love Rover has an impact on his behavior.

It's common for people with these dogs to give them love and affection every time they come near us. People usually do not understand that in that situation they are being reactive to Rover. In other words, Rover is being the decision maker. He decides he wants your attention and so goes to you and nudges you. Without thinking about it you reach down and pet him. Rover learns that you are a follower. He's asked you to pet him and you did. If you're the follower, then he must be the leader.

If Rover thinks he's the leader in your home then he'll be doing things based on his understanding of the role of leader. It's common that I see behavior such as barking at people or dogs passing the house, pulling on leash, jumping up on people, stealing items, not listening and even more serious behaviors including nervousness, separation anxiety and aggression. All these can happen as a result of not understanding how powerful love is as a reinforcer of behavior.

These situations are all common. We bring dogs into our homes because we want to love them. Rover comes over and looks up at us or nudges us with his nose. Without even thinking about it we reach down and pet him. We're not even aware that we're doing it, but Rover is aware of it and he's learning from it.

If you use the power of love to your advantage and reward Rover for good behavior you'll have taken a big step toward having a great relationship with him. Pet him when he's calm and happy not when he's excited or jumping. Don't "comfort" him when he's nervous or scared. Reward him for listening and for doing what you ask him to do. Be proactive and invite him to you to give him lots of love and affection. When you become aware of how you reward Rover with a pet, a happy voice, or with play and dole out love as the reward it is. Rover will respond and be the happy companion you envisioned when you brought him home. Happy Dogs = Happy Families.