

Understanding Canine Discipline

By Gail Tamases Fisher

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Brandy, the Yellow Lab, ate the steak thawing on the counter for dinner. If mom flaps the empty wrapper in his face, spanks him, yells at him and ignores him for 20 minutes, will he ever do it again?

Your Basset Hound had an accident on the living room carpet. Will it help house-training if you wake Katie out of a sound sleep, drag her into the living room, shove her nose into the mess, scream at her and put her in the yard for an hour to think about it?

Misha, the runaway Siberian Husky, just got back from a two-hour romp. Will he be cured of roaming if dad greets him, face contorted with fury, yelling about how the entire neighborhood watched him in his bathrobe and slippers chasing a dog?

Not long ago, I had a behavioral consultation with a former student, Kay, who had just bought a Sheltie puppy. Her four-year-old Standard Poodle, Ebony, was so jealous that she attacked the puppy and tried to kill him.

Kay had stopped the attacks, reprimanded and hit Ebony and shut her in another room to think about her behavior. Kay worried that the two would never get along, and she would have to give one away.

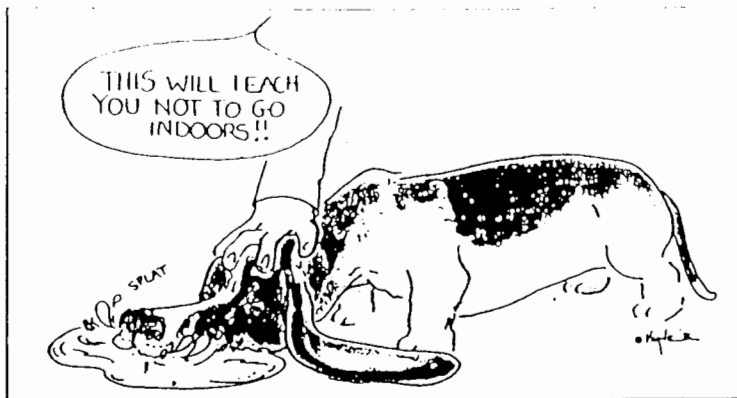
During the consultation, I watched the puppy bother and badger the older dog—pulling on her ears, attacking her tail pompon—having a wonderful time, as puppies do. When Ebony had had enough, she told him so with a growl and a nip. The puppy screamed as if he'd been killed, got up, shook himself off, and went looking for new things to do. This was not an attack out of jealousy; it was normal canine behavior. It was discipline.

I recommended Kay stop intervening, stop all punishment and allow the two dogs to work out their relationship.

Several days later Kay called to say her dogs were getting along fine. If Ebony didn't want to play, she gave the puppy a meaningful look, and he went away.

Attempts to change behavior through punishment, as Kay and the dog owners in the first examples did, are not uncommon. Misconceptions about discipline are responsible for most of the behavior problems

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I see in my consultation business, and many of the questions I am asked. Even breeders are uncertain about what constitutes discipline and whose responsibility it is.

Yelling, hitting, rubbing a dog's nose in his mess, and isolation are common punishments meted out by well-meaning dog owners everyday. Are there better ways? Of course.

What is Punishment?

For most people punishment is the penalty for having done something wrong. For the operant psychologist, punishment is judged by its effect on behavior. If the penalty ends the misbehavior, it qualifies as punishment.

For example, 16-year-old Bobby wasn't home before his curfew on Saturday night. His parents punished him by having him do the dishes for a week. Doing dishes is a small price to pay for staying out late with his friends, so Bobby continues to ignore his curfew. His parents may feel better having him pay for his offense, but to the psychologist the penalty was not successful because it did not change the behavior. If Bobby had been grounded for a month, after which he always came home on time, grounding was effective punishment.

In dog training, if hitting, yelling and sending the dog to the cellar end the misbehavior, it is effective punishment. Has yelling at Misha for running away stopped him from chasing rabbits? Does rubbing Katie's nose in her mess house-train her? Did putting Ebony in isolation stop her from disciplining the puppy? Will waving a steak wrapper at Brandy prevent him from taking the steak tomorrow? The answer is "No." Therefore, these are not effective punishment..

What Can Be Done?

Let's substitute the word *discipline* for *punishment*. Humans can learn from the way dogs discipline each other.

Canine discipline is universal within the species, regardless of breed. For example, when an adult dog disciplines a puppy, discipline starts with a look, followed by a wrinkle of the lip, often accompanied by a low growl. If these warnings are ignored, what follows is swift and to the point. The adult snaps at the puppy, nipping the nose and sometimes engulfing the puppy's entire head

in his or her mouth. Often the adult rolls the puppy over onto his back.

The adult's growl and great show of teeth are impressive to both puppy and observer. Actual biting is rare, and if it occurs, is often accidental.

It is not necessary for you to bite your puppy on the nose or put your mouth around his throat to discipline him, although we have known people who have nipped their dogs on the muzzle, and they say it was effective. We prefer other means. There are four levels of discipline, depending on the age of the dog and the misbehavior being corrected.

The first level is a verbal *reprimand*. Young puppies quickly learn to associate sounds with discipline. We utter a bark-like, "Ah, ah!" or "stop!" We also growl at young puppies when they are doing annoying things such as untying shoe laces or tugging on the hem of a dressing gown.

Level two is necessary if verbal reprimands don't stop the young pup. Take him *by the scruff of the neck* and make eye contact while growling or saying "stop!" For most puppies this is sufficient.

The older puppy or adolescent dog may require an escalation to level three. *Grasp him by the cheeks*; the skin and hair just behind the corners of his mouth, under his ears. *Lift his front end off the ground, make eye contact and say "stop!"* When he averts his eyes let go and ignore him. As soon as his gaze wavers, stop discipline, even if he is growling.

The final measure is reserved for cases of aggression, either toward people or other animals. Take the loop end of a leash and smack the dog on top of his muzzle.

Whichever level of discipline is used, if three tries do not change the dog's behavior, then it is either the wrong level, or the discipline is not being used effectively.

Now that you know *what to do*, it is critical to know *when to do it*.

When Does Discipline Take Place?

Many dog owners believe that a dog will not "learn his lesson" unless they hurt or frighten him. They tell me they are not able to get the point across because they cannot hit their dog hard enough. Besides being cruel, this

is nonsense. Severity is not the problem; timing is.

Adult dogs discipline puppies *while* they are misbehaving, and even before they misbehave, when they are *thinking* about it.

For example, picture a large Mastiff chewing a bone. A Mastiff puppy prances up and tries to take it away. Dad will discipline the pup with a snarl and a snap. Later, if the puppy even walks too close to the bone, dad will give him a meaningful look and curl his lip. That is sufficient to discourage all but the most persistent puppies. Discipline between adult and puppy is swift, to the point, and *immediate*. To the adult dog, it is not the *taking* of the bone that is at issue. It is *thinking* about taking the bone that is discouraged.

Most people punish a dog *after* he has done something wrong. Imagine if dad had let the puppy take the bone and prance away to chew it before he pounced. Rather than learn not to take the bone, the pup would learn to take the bone and run when he saw dad coming.

Correctly administered, discipline teaches the lesson in one or two experiences. Occasionally, a puppy will try and try again, only to be repeatedly chastised. Another portion of our behavior film shows a puppy trying to worm her way between mother and bone and getting warned over and over again. Puppy aptitude testing at seven weeks confirmed what her persistence showed—a dominant puppy who required more discipline than her littermates.

Let's go back to our well-meaning dog owners in the first examples. If what they did was not correct, how could their timing be improved?

When house-training a dog, rather than yell about finding a mess in the living room, Katie's owner must learn to recognize the behavior that indicates Katie needs to go out. If she is caught in the act inside, a verbal reprimand will usually stop her, and she can then be taken outside where she is praised for going.

Brandy's owner can either put the steak out of reach when she leaves him alone, or watch him when he's sniffing around the kitchen. As soon as she sees Brandy *think* about looking on the counter for tidbits, she disciplines with a bark-like "Ah-Ah!" Preventing him from even tasting the steak is crucial.

And Misha's owner must train him to come when called and put up a fence so he cannot run away. When Misha returns from a romp, it is senseless to yell at him. He'll learn that it's unpleasant to come home, and next time he escapes he'll stay away a bit longer.

Dogs are masters at reading body language and understanding facial expression. They recognize fury from the stance, angry look, and tone of voice, but they cannot understand the raging words. For example, Roberta came home from work to find that Rosie, her

Cocker Spaniel, had destroyed a new pair of shoes. She yelled, "That was my favorite pair of shoes! I'm so angry with you for chewing them, I'm going to spank you!" Would this discourage Rose from chewing shoes tomorrow? If anything, it can make the problem worse.

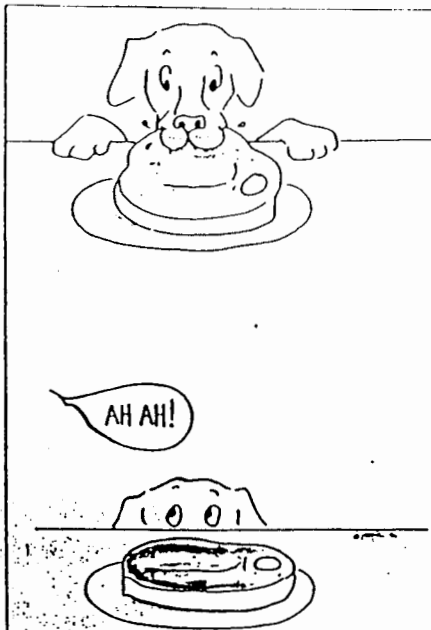
When a dog is punished for destroying shoes hours ago, she learns that homecomings are unpleasant, especially if there's something chewed. She may associate the anger with the destruction, but she does not associate the destruction with *her* earlier behavior. Punishment distresses and confuses her. Confusion leads to stress, anxiety and tension, which Rosie may relieve by chewing something else.

When Is Discipline Learned?

I have behavioral consultations with many people whose dogs were removed from the nest prior to six or seven weeks of age. Often the dogs behavior problems are directly related to this early removal. These dogs never learned discipline while they were puppies.

Behavior is either innate or learned. Innate behaviors are automatic—such as eating, breathing and sleeping—occurring without learning how to do them. Some behaviors must be learned, requiring experience for their expression.

Accepting discipline is a learned behavior. Puppies learn discipline by interacting with adult dogs during a critical period of development, the Canine Socialization Period, which is from three to seven weeks of age. If a puppy does not experience discipline at this time, he may grow into an adult dog who has difficulty accepting leadership and discipline from *any* leader—human or canine. When he is disciplined, he may bite his owner, or he may simply ignore him and resume his behavior. Such a dog is difficult or, for many people, impossible to train for simple control, obedience, conformation, field work, or other tasks.



If a litter is orphaned or not disciplined by the dam or another adult dog prior to seven weeks of age, it is the breeder's responsibility to assume that role to ensure the dog's normal psychological development.

Who Is the Disciplinarian?

Any normal adult dog is an effective disciplinarian to a puppy. It may be the biological sire or dam or another mature dog. It doesn't have to be the same breed, and can even be an adult who is smaller than the puppies. I have seen a four pound Yorkshire Terrier discipline a 25 pound Mastiff puppy.

We let other adult dogs besides the dam interact with the puppies at an early age. They are introduced to the litter shortly after birth. The dam, who is very protective for the first week or two, is separated from the litter for the introduction. Our dogs get excited when they smell and hear a new litter of puppies, and are anxious to check the whelping box to make certain everything is all right. Different dogs react differently. Having checked them out, some want nothing further to do with the puppies until they are old enough to play. Others want to see them regularly and will watch them for hours.

Our male participates in the rearing of the puppies as soon as the dam will allow it, whether or not he's the biological father of the litter. Our first stud dog, Argus, was fascinated by the puppies in his first litter. After about ten days, when the dam would let him into the whelping box, he lay in a corner, head on his paws, and watched. If a puppy cried, he was concerned. When they nursed, he was curious about the noises they made.

As the puppies got older he became their Jungle Gym. They would climb on top of dad's head and slide down his stop onto his flews. They'd play tug of war with his ears. It wasn't until they were about five weeks old that he began teaching them the rules, and discipline began.

At first, he set them up to learn the lesson. He'd take a toy into their pen and lie down to chew it. Naturally, the puppies immediately came over to help, and he disciplined them. All it took was one lesson, then if they got a little too close, at the slightest twitch of his muzzle they'd back off.

A male's relationship with puppies is different from a female's. Females have less tolerance for puppy antics. Dogs will put up with general misbehavior and chaos, while bitches will often quiet an unruly mob. But males teach the puppies the rules of the pack—the pack leader is supreme and puppies shouldn't bother him when he's got something he wants.

Interaction, with any normal adult dog will teach the puppies the most important lessons of their lives; how to recognize and use body language and facial expression, and to accept discipline.

Responses to Discipline

People, who are not familiar with how a puppy responds to discipline, often

mistakenly believe the adult dog is hurting the puppy. That was Kay's thought when Ebony disciplined the Sheltie puppy.

A puppy's normal reaction is to scream as if he's being murdered. This is the equivalent of crying "uncle," and it stops the adult dog.

Along with the vocalization, the puppy uses body postures which stop discipline. He assumes a submissive posture—rolling over on his back, tucking his tail tightly against his belly, averting his eyes and remaining motionless for varying lengths of time.

Once the discipline stops, the puppy gets up and becomes active again, often trying to get the adult to play. He may paw and lick the adult's flews, or he may just shake himself and go off on his own, fully recovered and ready for some new adventure. Sometimes, he will repeat the behavior that got him disciplined in the first place. This time, however, a look is often enough to stop him.

The adult dog's reaction to the puppy is significant. When the puppy tries to entice the adult to play, the adult remains impassive. While the puppy is licking the flews and groveling, the adult turns his or her head away, looking dignified and aloof. The dog neither begs forgiveness by licking and cuddling the pup, nor does he chase him away into isolation.

Duration of Discipline

I once had a client who disciplined his St. Bernard mix, Buck, for about 15 minutes every evening. He would come home from work, find something chewed, and start yelling. Buck would urinate submissively, which further infuriated his owner. The harangue continued while he walked the dog, because Buck would usually try to urinate as soon as they got outside, which was not the area the owner wanted him to go in. So he continued hollering all the way to the appropriate spot, where he *still* scolded Buck about whatever had been chewed.

Buck didn't understand the *subject* of the scolding, only the *timing*. Since he was being scolded while he was relieving himself, the message he received was: it is wrong for me to urinate in the house, even though I can't help it; it is wrong for me to urinate out of the house, even though I can't hold it.

The behavior problem leading to the consultation was—you guessed it—inappropriate urination. Buck would urinate while he was lying down, while he was sitting, while he was on the bed, everywhere. Within two days of his owner stopping the 15 minute diatribe, and praising Buck for urinating outside, he stopped urinating in the house.

If 15 minutes is too long, how much is long enough for discipline to last? The answer is as long as it takes to say, "Stop it!" or "ah-ah!" and no longer. Speeches about how disappointed we feel, how betrayed, how angry, how we're going to get even do nothing but confuse the dog. The adult dog disciplines swiftly and has it over with *immediately*.

And Then?

Once the discipline is over, then what? Many owners beg forgiveness for having had to yell—they'll cuddle and pet and talk sweetly to their dog. Some will immediately pick up a toy and try to convince the dog that they are not bad guys after all. Those owners are destined to have their dogs misbehave again.

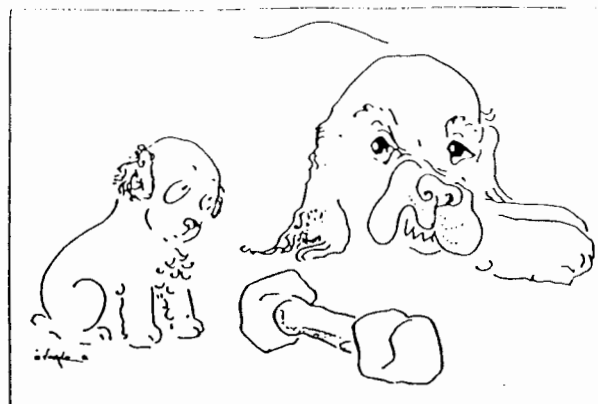
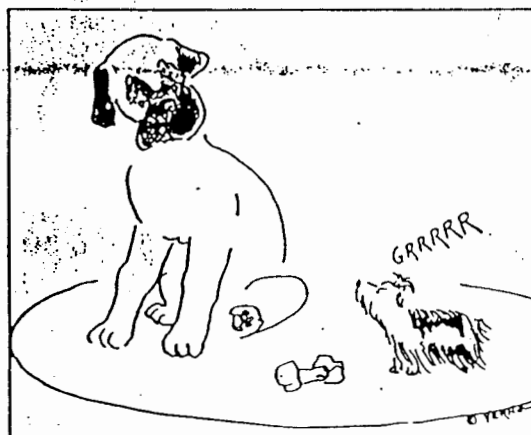
What does an adult dog do after disciplining a puppy? He or she ignores the puppy with a look of great dignity. There's a good reason for this. Remember the example of the puppy trying to worm his way between dad and bone? What would the puppy have thought if, after dad growled, he immediately leaned over the nuzzled and licked the pup? Puppy would have thought, "Fine! Great! *Now* I can take the bone!"

Discipline is *negated* if we praise and play with our dogs immediately afterwards.

Lesson To Be Learned

A dog will learn from discipline when he associates it with his actions. Incorrectly administered, discipline can cause behavior problems, neurotic behavior, or can undermine the relationship between owner and dog.

Disciplining a dog doesn't make him not love us, or mean we don't love him. Dogs respond to leadership with respect and obedience. And isn't that what we want?



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