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Communicative Value of Calming Signals

One of the discussion lists we subscribe to recently focused on yawning in dogs. While dogs yawn when they are sleepy or tired, yawning is also widely accepted as a displacement behavior. These are social conflict behaviors displayed when dogs are undecided about how to respond to an event. Displacement behaviors acquired that label because they are normal behaviors that are "displaced" out of the situations they are commonly seen.

Yawning, and other displacement behaviors such as lip licking and grooming, have been referred to as "calming signals", a popular term coined by Turid Rugaas. Ms. Rugaas states that "calming signals" are used to make others "feel safer and understand the goodwill the signals tell about" (p. 1 in "On Talking With Dogs, T. Rugaas). Their supposed goal is to prevent interactions from escalating into threats or aggression.

If any of you have watched our [Canine Body Postures videotape](#), you've seen the yawning German shepherd in a veterinary examination room. Our [Bite Prevention Program videotape](#) provides a number of other examples. The shepherd was anxious about being in the room, and was showing displacement yawning, restless pacing, and repeated turning to face the door, as though trying to get out of the room. No one was trying to interact with the dog.

One of the controversies about yawning and other displacement behaviors is whether they have any communication value. In other words, what affect, if any, does yawning have on the behavior of other dogs? And what motivates yawning? Is it the dog's individual response to conflict, or is he yawning to purposely communicate something to those around him?

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Our Piece

Rewarding Our Pets For Doing The Right Thing

Most of us understand that rewards are one of the most powerful ways to change behavior. If we want our dogs to sit at the door before going out, or if we want our kids to pick up their rooms, we are eager to use rewards (also known technically as positive reinforcement) to try to encourage the desired behavior. But how many of us think to reward our pets for doing what they already are doing?

Our dog Ashley frequently lies under Dan's desk when he is working there. That's a good thing, because when she is lying there, she can't be somewhere else chewing up a book or digging a hole. However, Dan admits he doesn't remember often enough to reward Ashley for lying under his desk, he just takes it for granted when she does.

We suspect that most of us just expect our pets to do the right thing without any overt reward on our part. We just naturally expect our dogs to greet people in a friendly manner, our cats to use their litterboxes

There are numerous examples of dogs yawning in response to stressful situations - such as the German shepherd in the exam room. Because no social interaction was involved, it's a pretty safe assumption that communication is not the motivation, at least in these types of situations.

In examples we've read that state yawning (by people or dogs) calms other dogs down, yawning is accompanied by other behaviors such as looking away from the dog, changing from a standing to a sitting position, or standing still rather than continuing to advance toward the other dog.

From these types of observations, there is no way to tell what, if any, contribution yawning made to the other dog's response. It's very possible that the accompanying behaviors were the ones that affected the other dog's behavior, not the yawning.

Dogs also yawn in situations in which they are conflicted about how to respond, but individuals around them are not. In our Body Posture video you'll see a dog yawn when a person reaches out to pet him. The person isn't upset, and doesn't need calming. But by yawning, the dog is indicating he is in conflict about how to respond to the petting. Should he allow it, should he move away, should he snap? He can't decide what to do so he yawns. The dog yawns in response to his own conflict, not to influence another's behavior.

Controlled, observational research studies using good data collection and statistical techniques could shed light on this issue. Such studies should record instances of yawning and the behavior of the supposed recipient dog both immediately prior to and after (not 30 seconds or several minutes later) the yawn to look for patterns. To demonstrate any communicative value of yawning, the recipient dogs' behaviors must show some sort of clear pattern of decreased arousal following the yawn.

Good research data is often lacking to support many of the interpretations of dog behavior that are widely published in the popular literature. If you're interested in learning more about the scientific basis for interpreting dog behavior, sign up for the next session of our [Fundamentals of Canine Behavior telecourse](#).

Cat Piece

Introducing Your Cat To Your New Baby

If you are a cat owner and a prospective parent, there are many things you can do to help your cat adjust to the new baby. Urine marking, litterbox problems, fears of the baby and rarely, aggression are some of the cat problems that can develop with the introduction of a new baby. Planning ahead and anticipating the changes your cat will be facing can help prevent these problems. What sorts of things should prospective parents think about and how can they prepare their cats for these changes?

and our parrots to be quiet when we are on the telephone. We don't reward them for doing these things.

The principles of learning tell us that no matter what the behavior, if we reinforce it, it will strengthen over time. So even though Ashley is lying under Dan's desk on her own, if he rewards her frequently for it, she'll do it more often. For Ashley and for us, that's a good thing.

The process of rewarding a behavior that animals (or people) do on their own is called catching. We "catch" our pets doing what we want and we reward them for it. Catching your pet doing something right is the first step in our **Five Step Plan for Positive Proaction**, which is a roadmap for preventing and managing problem behavior. You can learn more about the Plan in our [Just Behave!](#) and [What Your Cat Wants You to Know](#) telecourses.

So the next time your dog sits quietly when he greets you, or your cat scratches her scratching post or your parrot sits quietly while you are on the phone, reward your pet with a treat, a pat or a kind word. It will make both of your lives better.

For those who want to learn more about how animals learn, we recommend our telecourse, [Fundamentals of Animal Learning](#).

What's New at ABA

Suzanne's activities have been somewhat curtailed this month, after she tripped off the deck and broke a bone in her foot.

She's been in a large boot now

Just as dogs do, cats need to be acclimated to the baby and baby things, and to changes in routines. Doing this before the baby comes home will smooth the transitions that everyone in the house will have to make.

The first thing that prospective parents can do is to consider how their routines with their cat are going to change once the baby comes. Will your cat no longer be able to sleep in the bed with you? Will your cat have less time with you? Will your cat be restricted to certain parts of the house? If changes are necessary, you can slowly begin to make them before the baby comes home. Cats are more accepting of gradual changes than sudden ones.

As you begin to set up the nursery and collect baby clothes, cribs, strollers and the like, expose your cat to these things. She will naturally be curious about them, so set up special times where you let your cat be around them but in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere. Use petting or even kitty treats to associate the new things with pleasant emotions. This may reduce the likelihood of urine marking of the baby's things later on.

You can also expose your cat to simulations of baby routines such as feeding the baby, changing diapers or just holding the baby by using a life-size doll. Your cat can be exposed to baby sounds by playing an audio CD of baby noises. These simulations may reduce your cat's fear of the baby and get her used to the baby routines to follow. A really great CD of baby sounds called "[Preparing Fido](#)" is available from our website.

Once the baby comes home, let your cat come up to sniff and investigate the baby. Don't risk frightening your cat by taking the baby to her. Try to associate these encounters with pleasant things, such as petting or treats.

Make sure your cat has the same access to her litterbox after the baby comes as before. Also be diligent about cleaning the box regularly. This may prevent housesoiling problems related to a dirty litterbox.

Don't ever leave your baby alone with your cat. Accidents can happen in a split second. While there is no truth to the myth that cats want to 'suck the air' from babies, it's probably not a good idea to let your cat sleep in the crib with your baby. If your cat snuggles too close to the baby or tries to lay on the baby (some cats love to sleep on warm people, especially if they smell like milk!) it could cause injury.

If you'd like to learn more about how you can create a cat-friendly environment for your cat, sign up for our telecourse [What Your Cat Wants You To Know](#). Finally, keep in mind that millions of cats have adapted to having a new baby in the house with no problems whatsoever. With a little planning and forethought, you can make the transition a smooth one for you and your cat.

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for three weeks, with three more to look forward to. She had to miss the Bolder Boulder, a 10K road race, for the first time in almost 20 years, but Dan still put in a good race. One triathlon also had to go, but she's holding out hope for another in mid-July. Dan will be competing in a triathlon this Sunday, June 13th.

The good news is that our [Help! I'm Barking and I Can't Be Quiet book](#) is finally in production. After several rounds of reviews from respected colleagues and our editor, it's now with our designer. You still have time to place a [place a pre-publication order](#) by June 17th, and we'll pay the shipping.

Check out our new telecourse schedule on our website. Based on your input, we are developing several new courses and will let you know as soon as we the first sessions become available. (We do have a Learning Course starting next week, June 15. Due to a technical glitch, you may not see it listed on the website until Thursday, June 10th but registration is open now!).

Our website is now safe on a new server with a new hosting company. We are still working on a new newsletter management service, so this issue of our ezine still has the same look you're used to. Next month though, you'll see some changes.

Thank you all for the feedback you've given us about this newsletter. If you like it, we encourage you to forward a copy to others you think might enjoy receiving it.

Next month you may be

hearing about a four-legged addition to our family!

About Our Services

Help Getting Our Telecourses Approved for Your CEU's

Don't forget that our telecourses geared toward professionals (two [Fundamentals](#) courses and [Dog Training Instructor](#) course) have been approved by the [Certification Council of Pet Dog Trainers](#) and the [Colorado Association of Certified Veterinary Technicians](#) for CEU's. If you'd like help getting these courses approved for CEU's by your professional organization, just [contact us](#) and we'll be happy to help!

Animal Behavior Associates, Inc.
4994 S. Independence Way
Littleton, CO 80123

303-932-9095
AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com