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For Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dear Suzanne,

It was wonderful to have so many of you stop by our booth at the APDT conference. We loved meeting you and want to say Thanks for your encouragement and kind words. We hope to see more of you at one of our several local October events and you east-coasters at Dr. Hetts' November New Hampshire workshop (see our "What's New" section). Also, don't forget to register for our two new telecourses coming up the first week in November [Dogs Who Don't Play Well With Others](#) and [Counter Conditioning and Desensitization](#).

Best,
Suzanne and Dan

Dog Piece: **Over Worked** **Dominance Theory**



We've written before about the confusion and misconceptions about "dominance" as it applies to dogs and their relationships with people. This topic is worth revisiting

from yet another perspective. On several occasions we've heard people

• **Cat Piece:** **Do Cats Need to Be "Free"?**

Recently, we heard about a cat owner who was letting his cats stay outside to roam the neighborhood because he felt they needed to be "free, natural cats". As you can guess, the outcome for the cats was not good. One was hit by a



label dogs as being dominant because they did things they supposedly knew their owners - or those they were interacting with - didn't like.

One dog was described as "being dominant" because he was ingesting his own feces (a behavior called coprophagia). Because the dog "knew" his owner didn't want him to do that, he was showing her who was boss by doing it anyway.

We heard the same rationale and "dominant" label applied to a dog for sniffing crotches. The dog "knew" people didn't like him to do it, and by doing it anyway he was asserting his "dominance".

First, we should question the idea that dogs know we don't like them to do things, but then do them anyway. The only way dogs know what behaviors we like and don't like is if we give them feedback that is contingent on their behaviors. This means we immediately reinforce behaviors we like with something the dog enjoys, and we immediately respond with something unpleasant every time the dog does something we don't like.

When we don't give consistent, immediate and appropriate feedback, dogs continue to perform certain behaviors because they are motivated (for whatever reason) to do so. This has nothing to do with dominance. Sniffing genitals is a normal greeting behavior for dogs - it just doesn't happen to be one for people. The motivations for coprophagia are poorly understood, but certainly have nothing to do with dominance. Social hierarchies sometimes help determine which individual will get priority access to a limited resource, and we have yet to see a dog threaten its owner in a direct competition over whom is going to eat the poop!

A second issue in these misconceptions about dominance is that dominance is often equated with control of behavior.

car and killed, the other developed a severe parasite infestation and almost died. She was rescued by a friend of ours who treated her illness and made her a happy indoor cat. In this case, letting the cats be free outdoors was not in their best interests. Do cats need to be free to roam outside?

It's difficult to definitely determine the behavioral needs of cats. Certainly cats have existed outside as farm cats and strays for hundreds of years. But a history of outside existence doesn't prove cats need to be free to roam outside to have a high quality of life.

Dr. Dennis Turner, a certified applied animal behaviorist and cat behavior expert, has suggested seven behavioral needs of cats. These are: 1. social companionship with people and/or other cats; 2. one litter box per cat or access to other appropriate elimination area; 3. a warm, safe place to sleep; 4. elevated perches and resting areas; 5. one or more scratching posts; 6. enough space so that cats can get away from other cats or people when they want; and 7. mental stimulation for enrichment and to avoid boredom.

Many of the needs Dr. Turner suggests can easily be met indoors. There is no scientific evidence that cats need to roam outside. The two needs that present the biggest challenge for owners of indoor cats are space to get away from others and mental stimulation.

Providing perches, cubby holes, closets and shelves and generally making use of vertical space can help provide privacy for cats, even in a small home. Mental stimulation can be provided by social play with people, access to a window to see outdoor wildlife such as birds and squirrels, and toys that allow the cat to simulate prey catching.

Space and mental stimulation also can be provided with controlled outdoor access. Letting cats have access to an outdoor cage or screened porch where they can be safe is one option. Taking cats on walks outside in a [kitty stroller](#) or a leash and harness (watch for Premier's new "Come with Me Kitty" harness to be released 12/1) are other options. There are

Animals in dominant roles in relationships do not attempt to control every move those in more subordinate roles make. Unless we have her on leash, we don't have much control over Coral (our Irish setter) once she spies a bird close by and wants to chase it. Does this mean Coral is showing her "dominance" over us by chasing birds rather than paying attention to us? Not at all. It just means at that point in time birds are much more important to Coral than we are. Not surprising as her sire was a national field trial champion and we haven't done much off-leash training with her.

Our take home message is that when you are reaching for explanations for why a dog is engaging in a particular behavior, put on your critical thinking caps rather than uncritically invoking the over- worked "dominance" idea.

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## **New Telecourses**

### **Filling Up Fast!**

**Don't miss out on our newest classes.**

[Dogs Who Don't Play Well With Others](#)  
Wednesday, November 1st

[Using Counter Conditioning and Desensitization](#)

Thursday, November 2nd

For those who have taken Pia Silvani's [Becoming a Great Dog Training Instructor](#) telecourse, don't forget that she has added a session to address the list of FAQ's in the class handout. If you have previously taken the class, you have a one time opportunity to sign up for this discussion session **ONLY** without retaking the class. [Sign up NOW](#)

many ways to provide for the needs of cats without letting them run free in the neighborhood. With a little creative thought, you can come up with ways to meet your indoor cat's behavioral needs and enrich her life.

- **Our Piece:**  
**Medical or Behavioral?**



Joan's domestic shorthair cat, Friskies, wasn't using her litterbox. Friskies' stools weren't normal, and Joan's veterinarian diagnosed a parasitic infection, Giardiasis. The veterinarian treated the infection with medication but when Friskies continued to defecate outside the box Joan and Friskies were referred to us.

When we saw Friskies, her litterbox use was erratic. Some days she would use the box, some days not. We had Joan make some changes to the litterbox to make it more attractive to Friskies and the problem improved – Friskies used the box more often. However, there were still accidents once every week or two. A couple of months after we first saw Joan and Friskies, her veterinarian put Friskies on a different medication for the Giardiasis. The litterbox problem stopped completely. Friskies seemed to love her litterbox again. Clearly, Friskies' problem had both medical and behavioral components.

It's not uncommon for cats with medically-caused elimination problems, such as parasitic or bacterial infections, to develop aversions to the litterbox, which can continue even after the illness is treated. In Friskies' case, the medical condition persisted, and even though we were able to help reverse the litterbox aversion, the elimination out of the box continued until the illness was better treated.

Our friend and fellow certified applied animal behaviorist, [Nancy Williams](#), has seen several

for this October 21 session.

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of these complicated cases recently. A Great Pyrenees dog was referred to Nancy by a veterinarian for anorexia. The supposed cause was grief after the death of the other family dog. In another case, a Beagle was referred for supposed dominance aggression to the owner and the other family dog. Turns out the weight loss in the Great Pyrenees was due to misaligned teeth and atypical mange causing scratching and depression. The depression and weight loss had nothing to do with the loss of the other dog - this was simply a coincidence. The aggression by the Beagle was caused by severe hypothyroidism rather than "dominance" (see our Dog Piece in this issue) and medication for the hypothyroidism resolved the problem.

The take-home message is that what seems to be an obvious behavior problem may have a medical cause or complication. As Nancy points out "If your dog threatens you, the most likely cause is fear or pain, rather than a challenge to your leadership. Even gentle puppies that are handled frequently may growl if they are fearful or sore from being handled too much. Some dogs are predisposed to painful orthopedic conditions in their hips or spines. These dogs may also threaten if you try to move them."

When a behavior problem presents itself, think about medical problems first and have your pet evaluated by your veterinarian, including a specialist if necessary, before seeking behavioral help. Even if your pet is healthy, behavior problems can be complex and are generally not about your pet being dominant, disobedient or spiteful.

- **What's New:**  
**Seminar Season**

We have a busy fall planned with both local and out of state seminars and workshops. We hope to see many of you at one or more of these events. Whew, after making this list we realize all the work we have ahead to prepare for these programs!

Dr. Hetts is scheduled to deliver a 2 day workshop on Behavior Wellness on November 11th and 12th at the [Monadnock Canine Academy](#)

and Humane Society in West Swanzey, New Hampshire. Come and learn how to provide improved behavior wellness care while growing your business. The workshop is coming up quickly, so don't miss out. It has been approved for 13 CEUs by CCPT and IAABC. [SIGN UP](#) right now. If you need more information, contact Denise Mazzola at 603-352-9011, ext. 140 or by email at [denisem@humanecommunity.org](mailto:denisem@humanecommunity.org).

As a special bonus to all our ezine subscribers who attend the workshop we'll spend set aside time for you, to answer your questions about behavior wellness that may not be covered in the seminar.

On October 6, Dan presented two lectures to the Veterinary Technician program at the Front Range Community College in Fort Collins.

Last night (October 10), we presented another "Introducing Your Dog To Your New Baby" program at Littleton Adventist Hospital for a record 35 people! It's so gratifying to see these prospective parents take the time to help their four-legged kids adjust to the new addition to the family.

On October 18th, Dan and Suzanne will be presenting an evening workshop for the [Veterinary Referral Center of Colorado](#) on "Delivering Behavior Wellness Care: Benefits To The Veterinary Practice, Veterinary Staff, Clients And Patients". This workshop is open to veterinary professionals only and is CEU approved by CACVT. For more information or to register call VRCC at 303-874-7387.

Suzanne and Dan will be conducting a daylong seminar "Bring Out the Best in Your Pets" for the [Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society](#) on Saturday, October 21 for pet owners and pet professionals. We'll have 6 presentations dealing with both dog and cat behavior. The seminar has been approved for 6 hours of CEUs by CACVT and CCPDT. We hope to see you there!

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ABA will have a booth at the [Wags to Whiskers Animal Wellness Fair](#)

sponsored by the Colorado Humane Society on October 28th at the Denver Merchandise Mart. Stop by and see us at booth 147 or during our Ask The Behaviorist session.

And last, we travel to Nashville on October 30th for another National Animal Control Level I Academy.