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For Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

September 13 , 2006, Volume IV Issue 9

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Dear Suzanne,

Take a close look at this month's issue, as we have new telecourse offerings for you. Suzanne is off to the APDT conference - if you are there, be sure and stop by Booth 57 and say hello. Happy fall to you!

Best,
Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **A Kitten's Rough Start**

We received an email recently about a kitten that had been rescued at 8 weeks of age. The woman found it hiding under her porch as her dogs tried to get to it. In her new home, the kitten hid underneath the bed for a month, but will now sit on the owner's lap and gets along well with the other family cats.

However, when a friend came to stay, it took the kitten 3 days before she would enter a room with the visitor, and two weeks before she would take a treat from him. If he reached for her or tried to touch her she would run. The owner wants help to reduce the cat's fear of people.



Dog Piece: **Dogs Who Don't Play Well With Others**



This week we dealt with several cases of dogs in the same family not getting along with each other. These problems range from just

grumpy growling to full blown fights in which injuries occur. Many clients, after surfing the internet or reading popular books, conclude the reason for

these conflicts is a "dominance problem", with both dogs struggling to be "alpha". This interpretation was one we also bought into much more frequently earlier in our careers than we do now.

The vast majority of fights between family dogs we see occur between female-female pairs. In many cases, the victim dog is clearly not challenging the other. In fact, the victim dog is going out of her way to avoid conflict, yet the attacking dog continues to find tiny transgressions that provide an excuse to attack. The victim dog may look at the attacking dog the wrong way, or just walk into a room or walk within 6 feet of a toy lying on the floor. "It's always something", to borrow a phrase.

Some of these problems progress with the victim dog continuing to be harassed until she becomes too afraid to even move around the house for fear of being attacked. We've seen these dogs develop stress related illnesses. Alternatively, other victim dogs reach a point where they don't tolerate the attacks anymore and begin to defensively fight back. That's when injuries begin to occur.

Clearly, these problems are not a competition over social status, as the victim dog is not competing for anything. The attacking dog is already in a dominant role in the relationship. The traditional recommendation of supporting the dominant dog's position is likely to make this kind of problem worse. It conveys a sense of entitlement to a dog that is clearly being a "bully", rather than a good leader. For unknown reasons, these "bullying" situations seem to develop much more often in female-female pairs than other gender combinations.

Dogs who are comfortable and secure being in dominant roles do not show this "bullying" behavior. Dogs in dominant roles can have priority access to certain resources some or all

A kitten found fending for herself at 8 weeks of age could not have had a good socialization period. There is some information to suggest the kitten had experienced some abusive treatment before being found, and we also do not know if she was born to a free ranging or feral queen. So, we have at least 3 possible contributing factors to this kitten's fearful behavior: 1. traumatic experiences, 2. lack of, or poor socialization, 3. potential genetic predispositions to fearful behavior from a possible "feral heritage".

Feral cats require different skills to survive than do indoor cats. Being cautious of anything new and avoiding people can be quite adaptive for feral animals. Those with these traits may be more likely to stay alive and reproduce than those that are less cautious. Thus, over generations, these traits will appear more frequently in the population. Cats that are descended from several generations of feral parents may not have the same capacity for being social and friendly to people as do domestic cats (do you know the definitions of feral, domestic and wild?).

We know behaviors are always a product of interactions and co-actions between genetic and environmental factors. Traumatic experiences such as this kitten may have suffered (she may have been dragged down a sidewalk on a leash and collar) during the sensitive socialization period can have long lasting effects on behavior. Combine that with her possible feral heritage, and the chances of this cat being a gregarious, friendly-to-everyone individual are not great.

The fact that the kitten is sufficiently social to sit in the owner's lap is a good sign. However, whether she can learn to generalize such friendly behavior to other people, within a relatively short time period, remains to be seen. Poorly socialized animals do not generalize very well.

This kitten will need substantial and consistent exposure to unfamiliar people to increase her sociability. Meeting one new person a week or even less frequently probably won't have much impact on her behavior. Plus, every encounter must include something very pleasant for the kitten. This may be an opportunity to chase a

of the time, but normally they do not "pick fights" as these bully dogs seem to.

These types of problems present yet one more example of how overly simplistic and dangerous "dominance thinking" is with regard to explaining dog behavior. In the case of "bully" dogs we help owners find ways to reinforce tolerant, non-aggressive behavior, not allow "bully" behavior to "work", (almost the opposite of supporting the dog's dominant role) and create pleasant, but controlled interactions between the dogs.

While it is important to acknowledge the existence of social hierarchies to fully understand dog behavior, invoking the overworked "dominance" explanation prevents us from helping family dogs develop healthy relationships with each other and with us.

If you'd like a more in-depth exploration of these problems be sure to sign up for our new telecourse [Dogs Who Don't Play Well With Others](#).

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>>>September Special<<<

**Dogs, Cats, & Kids**

*Learning To Be Safe With Animals*

**VHS: Regular Price: \$19.95  
This Month only \$13.95**

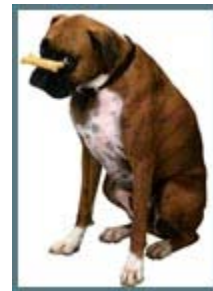
A terrific educational program that is ideal for parents, parent-teacher organizations, veterinarians, schools, shelters, humane organizations or anyone educating children. We highly recommend it.

feather, or a taste of "shrimp on the barbie" or other irresistible tidbit. These encounters will have to be carefully orchestrated, because if they aren't the kitten's fear may be too great to allow her to partake of these goodies.

Counter conditioning and desensitization techniques are often used to work with most fearful behaviors. To learn more about them, register for [our new telecourse about these procedures](#).

- **Our Piece:  
Three Ways to Get Your Pet to Do What You Want**

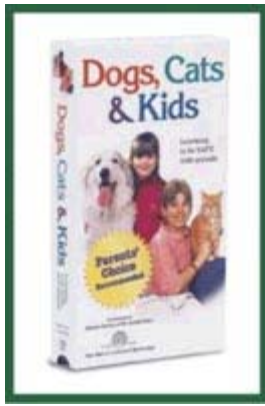
We ran across a recent article in a training magazine that discussed "behavior shaping". There are a number of techniques that make use of positive reinforcement to create new behavior patterns in animals. The most common of these are prompting and fading, shaping by successive approximation and catching. Because there seems to be some confusion regarding terminology, we thought it might be helpful to provide a brief summary of each.



Catching is an apt name for the procedure of observing, or catching a pet spontaneously doing something you like, and rewarding him for it. Catching requires the trainer (which may be the pet's owner) to pay close attention to the pet's behavior so as not to miss a chance to reward the desired behavior. Catching requires focus, because the more times you fail to reward occurrences of the behavior you want, the less effective is this technique. Catching works best with behaviors the pet displays quite frequently.

There are several popular variations on the techniques of prompting and fading. One is lure-reward training in which a lure – often a food treat – is used to entice the pet into performing a certain behavior. The lure is then given as the reinforcement for the behavior.

Another variation on this technique is target training. A pet is taught to touch a target, usually with its nose or paw. The target may



Discount will be taken in the shopping cart

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>>>Fall Telecourses!<<<

[Becoming a Great Dog Training Instructor](#)

Wednesday, September 27, October 4, 11, 18, 25

By popular demand:

In response to numerous requests, Pia has added a 5th session which will regularly be part of to her course to discuss the long list of FAQ's from clients contained in her class notes. If you've previously taken Pia's course, for this session ONLY, you can [register for this FAQ session alone.](#)

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be anything, from a dowel, to a commercially available "target stick", to merely your hand. The target becomes the prompt for all kinds of behaviors. For example, a horse can be prompted to load by positioning the target in the trailer, or a cat can be taught to climb a ladder by following the target.

Whatever prompt is used must ultimately be faded, or gradually removed, so that the desired behavior is not dependent on the presence of food, target, or other prompt. The article we mentioned was actually describing a prompting and fading technique not shaping, which is the third technique we'll describe.

Shaping by successive approximation involves rewarding behaviors that approach, or are similar to the final, desired behavior. In a pure shaping technique, the trainer will wait for the animal to offer various behaviors and then reinforce the ones that more closely approximate the wanted behavior.

For example, a cat or dog might be shaped to jump into a cardboard box by first reinforcing any interest the pet shows in the box, such as walking up to it, sniffing it, etc. Putting a paw on the edge of the box might be a behavior rewarded later in the shaping process. A series of intermediate behaviors will need to be reinforced until the pet finally jumps in the box.

These procedures can sometimes be used in conjunction with one another. If a pet shows no initial interest in the cardboard box, the trainer might point at the box or hold a target stick against the box (prompts) to get the shaping process started.

Our Fundamentals of Animal Learning [telecourse](#) and [CDs](#) discuss the use of positive reinforcement in training in more detail. CEU's from [CCPDT](#) have been applied for for the streaming audio and CD versions of this course. We'll keep you posted!

• **What's New:** **Dan the Busy Man**

We will have a booth September 14 -17 at the [Association of Pet Dog Trainers](#) annual conference in Kansas City Missouri. By the time this ezine goes out, those of you

attending the conference will likely already be on your way, but if you happen to check emails from the road, be sure and stop by Booth 57 and say hello.

Dan has had a busy month. He traveled to Salt Lake City to participate in another NACA 100 Training Academy and went to Fort Collins to talk to student members of the behavior club at the Veterinary Teaching Hospital. His most challenging undertaking was a week spent in Madison Wisconsin, serving as the behavior expert in a case involving the seizure of over 40 pit bulls. A tough, tough situation for everyone involved. Our hats are off to the shelter for doing the very best they can in an almost impossible situation.

Suzanne continues her steel pan drum lessons, and has joined a pan group that will perform Christmas songs at various locations around the city over the holidays. Playing is a great stress reliever for Suzanne and has also been helpful as she works through the recent death of her father, which we wrote about in last month's issue. Thanks to those who sent messages of comfort and condolence.

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Be sure and check out our [new telecourses](#). Registration will be available at our booth at APDT, so if you won't be at the conference, we suggest registering soon, before courses fill.