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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dog Piece: **How Dogs Work Out Their Relationships**



For the second time, we spent New Years at Grand Mesa Lodge on the western slope of

Dear Suzanne,

After the holidays, it can be tough in January to get back to a routine, but we hope you find our newsletter an enjoyable part of getting back to normal.

Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **Why do Cats Like Small Spaces?**

While reorganizing our closets, we laid a round, tote container on our kitchen



counter where our cat, Buffett's, food and water are located. As you can see from the accompanying picture, next thing we know, 16 pound Buffett has jammed himself into this little container, with his head peaking out over the edge.

Anyone who has cats has probably observed similar behavior. Cats seem to like to curl up in boxes, paper sacks and other "hide-holes"

Colorado, at 11,000 feet with our friends Mel and Joe. Grand Mesa is the largest mesa in the world, with breathtaking views of the grand valley below, where the Gunnison and Colorado rivers flow. We spent four days snow shoeing, cross country skiing, and just hanging out with our combined four dogs in a 12 x 16 foot cabin with a 2 bedroom loft.

We took only our 2 1/2 year old Irish setter, Coral, and she had not seen Pi, Cosmo or Jubal since she was an 8 month old baby puppy. You can see all four dogs in the accompanying picture, although you'll have to look hard for Jubal in her striped sweater. Pi is a friendly but rambunctious year old female bull terrier mix that Joe rescued from an Indian reservation. When the dogs were free on the trails with us, everyone got along beautifully. In close quarters however, Coral was intimidated by Pi's rowdy play and began growling and showing teeth in order to keep Pi away. Pi is generally quite submissive to other dogs and although she backed off some, she kept pestering Coral to play with her.

We didn't engage in any heavy-handed punishment, but instead took steps to manage the situation, help Coral become more comfortable with Pi, and encourage Pi to tone it down a bit. Things were improving, but during one particularly loud skirmish, Jubal, an older female terrier-dachshund mix, and the smallest dog of the four, decided she'd had enough. Jubal has the reputation of being grumpy and growly with other dogs although she's never fought or bitten.

Jubal rushed toward Pi and Coral, growling and ugly sounding, and both Pi and Coral immediately ceased their conflict. Jubal accomplished this without physically touching Pi and Coral at all. While Pi and Coral "exchanged words" a few more times over the next several days, they were much more tolerant of each other from that point on.

Our point to this story is that the mechanisms dogs use to create and manage their relationships are not easily mimicked by humans. Some folks would have recommended "alpha-rolling" or scruff shaking Pi, or Coral, or both, to let them know such behavior would not be tolerated. Proponents of these procedures claim they mimic dog behavior. They emphatically do

that seem so small as be uncomfortable. Buffett also likes to wrap himself into a tiny dog bed we had for Coral when she was a puppy.

Why do cats choose to spend time in such tight spaces? The short answer is we don't know enough about cat behavior to definitely answer that question. However, we do know that cats seek out hiding places when they want to avoid elements of their environment. It's why cats hide in their litterboxes in shelters and why they hide in closets or under the bed if they are harassed by other pets in the household.

Another possibility is that these sheltered locations help cats thermoregulate. Being inside of a container could provide insulation from both cold and heat, depending on location. Maybe this is why Buffett routinely sleeps on the bed with us in the winter (especially lately with our record snow fall!) but not in the summer. As a colleague of ours once said, love and social companionship in cats is temperature dependent!

Perhaps cats just like the feel of having something pressing around their bodies. There is a growing body of evidence from both children and dogs that wrapping or "swaddling" certain individuals can relieve anxiety.

All of the above are hypotheses about why cats like to use small, tight spaces. These aren't the only possible causes of the behavior. You may be able to think of others. To choose among these hypotheses and learn more about this behavior, we'd need to test our hypotheses by collecting objective data. Simply observing Buffett during warm and cold temperatures isn't sufficient as a test, we need to do an experiment

not.

Jubal managed to inhibit the conflict between Pi and Coral in just a few seconds without biting, or even touching them in any way. Plus Jubal weighs maybe all of 15 pounds, less than half of Coral, and maybe a third of Pi's weight.

When people grab, shake and pin their dogs to the floor for "discipline" they are not acting as Jubal did to peaceably settle a dispute. They are instead acting more at the level of a dog fight, when dogs bite and grab with their teeth and cause injury. Such procedures often cause dogs to become defensively aggressive.

Next time you hear someone advise getting physical with dogs, by scruffing or rolling them, just say no (to borrow a phrase!). We need to use other methods, because humans are really bad at trying to be dogs.

Pia Silvani's popular ["Becoming a Great Dog Training Instructor"](#) telecourse begins tomorrow (Thursday) at 6pm mountain time. We have ONE SINGLE space left in the class. If you'd like to be the lucky person to fill this last space and benefit from Pia's many years of experience teaching dogs and people you have until noon Thursday mountain time to register. We promise you'll LOVE the information Pia has to offer.

The [Tug-a-Jug](#) and [Bouncy Bone](#) toys from Premier Pet products were HUGE holiday hits. We've moved our [informational video](#) on the toys to the Tug-a-Jug page. Take a look at it if you haven't already. It's about 4 minutes long. If you are on dial-up, the video will play better if you wait several minutes for it to load.

These toys have been life-savers for us, as they've kept Ashley and Coral occupied on days the snow and ice have prevented us getting them out for walks.

that controls other things and manipulates temperature systematically. Observing how many cats, not just Buffett, respond to the temperature changes allows us to test the thermoregulation hypothesis.

The next time you wonder about why your pet does something, try to think about how you could do an experiment to identify the causes. It's a good exercise to help you think constructively about why your pet does the things she does. It's also good to critically think about the reasons other people give you for pet behavior. Ask them or yourself: How do we know this? Where did the explanation come from? Did it come from careful experimentation or is it just an opinion?

Scientific research offers the best hope for understanding pet behavior and helping us improve the lives of our pets and ourselves.

• **Our Piece:**
Providing Behavioral Care

As most of you who are professionals in the pet industry know, the issues of certification, credentialing, professional titles, and competency in the fields of dog training and pet behavior has long involved controversy. For pet owners, it has resulted in confusion about how to choose trainers and behaviorists, when to select one or the other, what defines a trainer versus a behaviorist, what to look for in an individual's academic training and professional experience, and what methods and equipment to choose to change a pet's behavior when necessary.

A recent editorial on the subject by Dr. Karen Overall in the newly created Journal of Veterinary Behavior ("How do we obtain and disseminate accurate information?",

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2006 1: 89-93, published by Elsevier) is sure to add to this controversy. Parts of this controversy may ultimately require legal intervention to resolve.

For pet professionals, it's easy to have one's buttons pushed and react in ways that further polarize the field. We've had long discussions recently with a few close colleagues and while we admit our buttons have been pushed as well, we've tried to see the bigger picture.

The bigger picture is the welfare of our pets and the preservation and optimization of the people-pet bond. It's an unarguable fact that the more we know about an animal's behavior and biology the better able we are to provide for that animal's welfare, both behaviorally and physically. That includes providing good husbandry, meeting our pets' behavioral needs and changing their behavior when necessary through training and behavior modification.

In our opinion, it's also an unarguable fact that the best way to expand our knowledge is through scientific investigation. What we learn from science can then be applied to animal welfare issues, including pet behavior problems.

This doesn't negate the important information we obtain from working "hands-on" with animals. Doing so often provides the fodder for research. And "hands-on" work and research are not necessarily mutually exclusive activities.

Both pet parents and pet professionals need to use critical thinking skills, when evaluating information about pet behavior. It's important to be able to differentiate between science and opinion, anecdotes and results of objective research. Our article on cat behavior

in this issue gave examples of hypotheses or potential explanations for behavior that require data to support or refute.

In human health care, a variety of different practitioners address psychological or behavioral issues. These include clinical psychologists (Ph.Ds) psychiatrists, PsyDs (a non research degree), psychiatric social workers, marriage and family therapists, licensed social workers, school counselors, as well as general practice physicians. Each of these practitioners has a slightly different focus, based on their professional training. However all are academically and/or clinically trained and most (if not all) have also attained some type of professional certification.

Providing the best behavioral care for our pets will require different types of professionals working together and recognizing that no one professional can be all things to all animals. We need to be willing to take an objective look at academic and experiential qualifications and acknowledge our strengths as well as our limits.

Our hope is that the more moderate voices of cooperation in the various sectors of those who work with pet behavior will prevail, because if they don't, we decrease the chances of making the best possible behavioral care available to the greatest number of pets.

- **What's New:**
Most Burning Question
Page Added

In our 'seminar at sea' December cruise we learned new



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skills to create audio and video products for you. To help us focus our efforts, we've added a page to our website called "[Your Most Burning Question](#)". We invite you to ask us questions about pet behavior. Questions don't need to be problem related (in fact we hope many of them aren't!) but could also include questions about preventing problems, why pets behave in certain ways, or what educational needs you have to advance your pet related careers. We won't be able to answer your questions individually, but will be compiling them so we can better assist you with targeted products, services and even newsletter articles. So go there now, and ask us [Your Most Burning Question!](#)

You've probably heard about our record snow falls here in Colorado. Denver usually receives 60 inches of so of snow during a winter season. This year, 52 inches of snow fell in December alone! We are bracing for another 8 inches this weekend. Right before Christmas, we spent 4 extra days in Conroe TX with Dan's parents, as the Denver airport closed for over 36 hours, causing massive flight disruptions.

Suzanne just delivered a presentation on misconceptions about "dominance" in dogs to 70 PETSMART trainers. She travels to Atlanta later in January for more internet business training. Dan's been busy with expert witness activities in several dog related cases and with financial record keeping.

We hope all of you are off to a great start to 2007!