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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dog Piece: **Worrisome Puppy Behavior**



While browsing another pet related website's discussion forum, we discovered a post from a concerned dog owner about her new 9 week old puppy. The puppy was growling at the resident 8 year old adult dog that

was giving him an apparently friendly, get-to-know-you sniff. The puppy was also quite timid and shy around

Dear Suzanne,

Happy summer! Be sure and check out our "What's New" section. There's a lot going on at ABA that will help YOU and your pet!

Best wishes,
Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **Litterbox Lapses**

We haven't written about cat elimination problems for awhile so we thought we'd address a couple of questions that came in from came in from [The Most Burning Question](#) link on our website's home page.



One visitor wants to know if it's normal for a cat to urinate in the litterbox standing up in the spraying position. This is an interesting question. The variation in normal urination for postures, to our knowledge, has not been studied in cats. Typically, the standing up, spraying posture is associated with urine-marking, not when the cat is merely voiding its bladder.

However, years ago, Dan's older cat Hamlet,

strangers. A person who replied to this post said to just give it time, this wasn't uncommon, the dogs would work things out and the puppy would learn to love people.

Well, maybe. Several research studies have shown that fear is one behavior that tends to persist from puppyhood into adulthood. These studies showed a fairly high heritability for fear. We should digress for a moment and explain heritability.

Heritability quotients reflect how much variability in a behavior, within a population of animals, can be attributed to genetic variation. In order to measure heritability, the genetic relationships among the population of animals being studied must be known.

That's one reason why heritability studies in dogs aren't very common. Some of the guide dog agencies have conducted them, and data have also been gathered on populations of livestock guardian dogs. Heritability applies only to the population of animals studied and only for the behavior studied.

It is not possible to partition out genetic and environmental effects on behavior within an individual. So, if you read or hear someone say, "Well, that dog's aggression problem is 60% genetic and 40% environmental", you know they are either trying to be funny, or they don't know what they're talking about.

Back to our puppy. Puppies in the sensitive period for socialization should be quite open to forming new relationships. That's the hallmark of that developmental period. Puppies at this age usually bounce up to anyone unfamiliar - dog, human, or other species - with curiosity and are ready to make a new friend. Some puppies may be more tentative than others, but the defensive threat this puppy was making is not good. Puppies are usually quite submissive to adult dogs.

routinely assumed a posture that was half way between squatting and standing when he used the litterbox. We were fairly certain this was due to arthritis in one hip from a previous injury, which made it uncomfortable for Hamlet to fully squat.

We have had cases in which cats seemed to routinely spray in the litterbox and nowhere else. This would seem to indicate they are using this posture to void their bladders rather than to mark territory. So the short answer to the cat owner's question is, if this behavior is a long-term pattern - it might be normal - for that particular cat. If however, this is a recent change in the cat's behavior, we'd suggest a veterinary evaluation.

Another reader wants help with two cats that, for the past year, have been defecating right next to the litterbox. Assuming that the owners have already had their cats examined by their veterinarian, the most common reason for this pattern is a litterbox aversion. The cats have the habit of relieving themselves in the litterbox location, but for unknown reasons seem to no longer find the box and what's in it, acceptable.

Without knowing what's caused the aversion, resolving it is often a process of modifying different aspects of the litterbox. Providing a completely different box (different shape, color, size), and a soft litter may help. The litter should be unscented, and put in the box at a relatively shallow depth of 1 ½ inches or so. For help with cat elimination problems, check out our booklet [Cats Come Clean](#), and our audio program [Creating a Cat Friendly Environment](#).

We welcome more [Most Burning Questions](#) submissions, but will not be able to respond to them individually. We use them to develop new products, articles such as this one, and even as a basis for Suzanne's column in [Dog Watch](#).

- **Our Piece:**
Misinterpretations of Pet Behavior

We just talked to a client whose mixed breed dog had snapped and



What should this new puppy owner do? Well, she needs to carefully manage the interactions between the puppy and the adult dog. She also needs to be able to trust the adult dog. Good natured adult dogs will either not take such bad puppy manners seriously, or they will try to put a stop to the puppy's threats without traumatizing the puppy. If the adult threatens back and the puppy doesn't back down, that's a really bad sign.

Lots of socialization experiences with people are in order as well. Heavy handedness with this puppy is likely to backfire, so scruff shakes and pinning the puppy if he growls are not the way to go.

If you want to revisit this issue, we've posted last month's "Dominance Rant" on BehaviorCorner.com/blog because we had so many requests for it.

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## June Special

**Sale 10%**

this month on the popular DVD

**"Observing and Interpreting  
Canine Body Postures"**

Learn how to recognize when dogs are being threatening or aggressive, or showing signs of stress or fear, and how you should react to lower dogs' arousal and avoid being bitten. Initially designed for pet professionals, dedicated dog owners will find this program fascinating and informative.

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growled at her 3 year old son. The dog hadn't touched her son, but instead after snapping, got up and walked to the other side of the room. Based on additional information we obtained from the owner it was clear that the dog, Blossom, was quite anxious around this child and just wanted the boy to stay out of her personal space. The boy was continually wanting to hug and kiss and Blossom and had actually fallen on her more than once.

After reading a book from the current media sensation trainer, the mother had determined that Blossom was good with her 4 year old daughter because her daughter was "dominant" over Blossom and her son wasn't. In actuality, the daughter just wasn't constantly in the dog's face like the 3 year old was. Blossom seems to like the children, she just doesn't want the 3 year old falling on her and hanging around her neck.

This situation points out how easy it is to misinterpret the "whys" of pets' behaviors. To take another example, people often mistakenly assume that anytime their cats are urinating in the house, they are marking territory. When behaviorists analyze the reason for a pet's behavior, they start by thinking about all the reasonable possibilities that could account for a particular behavior.

Next they mentally sort through which explanation best fits their own observations of the pet's behavior and the owner's description of it. In Blossom's case, an explanation of the daughter being more "dominant" over the dog than her brother really doesn't fit the owner's description of the situation. Not to mention it was totally at odds with an ethological understanding of what social dominance in relationships is.

Sometimes, none of the possible explanations "fit" very well. In these types of cases we need to have the pet owner gather more information for us. We may sometimes ask a cat owner for example, to change one feature of the box at a time and see how the cat responds.

And, because pets, like people are unpredictable and our knowledge of their behavior is less than perfect, we sometimes can never come up with a reasonable "why"

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for a particular behavior. We've seen many litterbox problems in which it just wasn't clear why the cat had stopped using the box.

It is however, infinitely more preferable to say "I don't know why Fido or Fluffy" is doing this, than it is to make up explanations that either don't fit the facts, have no basis in scientific understanding of behavior, or both.

In Blossom's case, her body language and avoidance behavior helped lead us to the interpretation that Blossom was afraid of the little boy. If you'd like more information about reading the body language of dogs, our [DVD "Canine Body Postures"](#) is a great resource. It's on the list of resources to prepare for the CCPDT exam AND it's on sale this month! See the details in this newsletter.

- **What's New:**
[Seminars, Webinars, Webcasts Oh My](#)



Our foray into the world of webcasts has been a success! The first session of our 4 week Animal Learning Telecourse/Webcast on Wednesday, June 6th, had people from as far away as Malaysia successfully participating in the class. We've permanently remedied the technical difficulties we had during the first 6 minutes of our free FAQ Telecourse/Webcast and are now quite excited about this new technology. If you missed this free session that allowed you to test how this format works, you can listen to the replay at anytime- just bear with us until the 6 minute mark. [Go HERE](#) to listen to the replay.

After we realized Internet Explorer 7 presented compatibility problems with our presentation CD-ROM programs, our plans have been to convert these to DVDs and increase the

number of titles in our collection. We are putting the finishing touches on our Introducing Your Dog To Your New Baby program, which we are re-branding as Helping Fido Welcome Your Baby. With the affiliate program we're working on, you can easily sell the DVD (and other eligible products) through an affiliate link from your website for easy commissions! We'll keep you posted! Look for more topics on our new "Helping Fido" series.

If you are interested in learning more about our developing affiliate program, drop us an email at info@AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com

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:: 303-932-9095

Don't forget to register for our [Canine Aggression seminar](#) coming September 15- 16 here in Denver. Fall will be here before you know it, so make your plans to attend now. Seating is limited.