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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dear Suzanne,

Happy Mother's Day to all of you who are moms to either 4 or 2 legged kids or both! Be sure and read about our new blog in the "What's New" section and take a minute to pop on over to BehaviorCorner.com/blog.

Best wishes,
Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **Why Cats Go Crazy**

Sam and Laura were lying in bed when they heard the commotion. It sounded like their cats Topper and Mr. Bottoms had gotten into a fight. They ran down to the basement to investigate and found Topper trapped underneath an overturned laundry basket. Topper was quite frightened and was threatening Mr. Bottoms. Apparently, Topper had tried to jump into the basket to sleep, knocked it over and ended up underneath it.



When Laura tried to free him, Topper tried to attack her and Mr. Bottoms. She was able to get out of the room with Mr. Bottoms and quickly shut the door, locking Topper inside. For several days after that, Topper continued to growl and try to attack Laura and Sam every time they tried to go into the room with him. What made Topper so threatening?

Dog Piece: **Dominance Rant!!**



Readers prepare thyselfes as the article this month may be a rant. Dan just returned from an appointment with a wonderfully dedicated owner whose dog is displaying symptoms of separation anxiety -

becoming destructive and howling about 10 minutes after the owner leaves. Previously he had worked with an "animal behaviorist" (who wasn't)

who told him the dog needed "structure" and that he needed to be a better "pack leader".

We just received a message in our inbox from a reader with an 8 month old kitten that her husband's dog has been aggressive to since they brought the cat into the home at 12 weeks. They consulted an "animal behaviorist" (who wasn't) who they said was "quite aggressive" and into the "dominance stuff". Their meeting apparently was not a pleasant experience.

Every day we fight the dominance myths. Separation anxiety has nothing to do with "dominance". Helping a dog accept a small kitten has nothing to do with being "dominant" over the dog.

I'm sure there will be readers who swear that after implementing "dominance techniques" their dog's behavior improved. Being consistent about which behaviors will be rewarded and which ones won't, and requiring your dog to display a desirable behavior, such as sitting quietly, before giving him what he wants can certainly result in a dog that is better behaved, but this has nothing to do with dominance.

Intimidation techniques that are often part of the "dominance" mythology can also work - temporarily at least - with some dogs to suppress behavior. That doesn't mean intimidation is appropriate or the best way to solve a problem. It just means that the dog is more afraid of the person doing the intimidating than he is motivated to perform the unwanted behavior.

And intimidation comes at a cost, which includes the risk of being bitten, when the dog attempts to defend himself or decides he's had enough of someone grabbing him and throwing him to the ground in a so-called "alpha roll". It's quite easy for dogs that have been man-handled in this way to decide that anyone reaching toward them quickly is going to do the same thing so they bite to prevent it. Then they get labeled as "dominant dogs" when in reality they are reacting defensively. Intimidation can CAUSE

Cats are known for showing redirected aggression. When they can't attack a target that has made them aggressive, they direct it on to another target, usually an innocent bystander. In this case, Topper became badly frightened when the laundry basket trapped him. His fear caused him to become aggressive and to threaten whoever was nearby, in this case Mr. Bottoms and Laura. In a sense, he "blamed" Mr. Bottoms and Laura for his tragedy even though they did nothing to cause it.

It is not uncommon for animals to associate people, other animals or even situations with painful or fear-provoking situations. Cats seem to be a little more prone to it than other animals. Topper really took it to extremes.

When we interviewed Laura and Sam, they reported that Topper had a history of becoming aggressive to bystanders when he was frightened or hurt. It's not clear why he is this way. We recommended they try to avoid situations that might make Topper fearful and begin to teach him to be less fearful of sudden noises, movements and other events he has had problems with in the past. Topper may never get over his aggressive tendencies when he is badly frightened or hurt, and Sam and Laura need to be very careful around him when he is in these states.

Most cats don't react as violently or for as long as Topper did when they are aggressively motivated. However, redirected aggression is always a possibility when cats are threatened or frightened, so people need to be very cautious with such cats. It is not widely recognized that cats can remain aggressive for quite some time after the initial event that made them aggressive.

A conservative safe rule of thumb is to avoid approaching a cat you know has been agitated within the past few hours. Carefully observe the cat's body postures and demeanor to try to read his emotional state. Use a toy or treat to help improve the cat's emotional state, and calm down. See if the cat is willing to approach you rather than initiating contact yourself.

• **Our Piece:** **Pets and Babies**

For many loving pet parents, their dogs or cats are their first children, and they want first to be sure their baby is safe with



aggression problems.

The myths get worse. We talked to a family who was told by their trainer that they and their 12 year old son had to "hump" their dog in order to establish their dominance over him. So they spent half an hour with the trainer chasing the dog around the backyard trying to mount him. Now the dog won't come when called and doesn't want to have much to do with them. Is anyone surprised?

I would guess that more harm has come to dogs in the name of being dominant over them than has happened with purposeful acts of cruelty. We'll soon be creating educational products to explain the dangers of "dominance", but for now remember if you believe or have been told you have a "dominant or alpha dog" - you probably don't. And if you've been told your dog's problems are a result of you not being a good pack leader - you are not a member of a pack. Step away from uncritical acceptance of dominance mythology, as these myths are not in yours, or your dog's best interests.

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## May Special

Dogs, Cats, & Kids.

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their pets, but also that their pets continue to be happy, integral parts of the family.

Parental concerns are justified, because too many pets are pushed aside or spend more time outside when problems between kids and pets develop that people don't know how to prevent or resolve. A variety of problems can develop with the introduction of a new baby including destructiveness, urine marking, fear of the baby and rarely, aggression. Planning ahead and anticipating the changes your pet will face can help prevent these problems.

What sorts of things should prospective parents think about and how can they prepare their pets for these changes?

Preparation includes acclimating your pet to the baby's things, such as the bed and new toys, changes in family routines, and to the baby himself. Be proactive and begin this process months, or at least weeks, in advance. As you set up the nursery and collect baby paraphernalia, allow your pet to investigate these items and encourage quiet, calm behavior. Use petting or even treats to associate the new things with pleasant emotions. This may reduce the likelihood of urine marking of the baby's things later on.

Evaluate how your routines with your pets are going to change once the baby comes. Will they no longer sleep in the bed with you? Will your pets be restricted to certain parts of the house at times? Whatever changes you anticipate, make them gradually NOW rather than in a hurry, overnight after the baby arrives.

Create simulations of baby routines such as feeding, changing diapers or just holding the baby, using a life- size doll. These simulations may reduce your pets' fears of the baby and accustom them to future baby routines. Expose your pet to baby sounds using the really great CD of baby sounds on "[Preparing Fido](#)", available from our website.

Assess your pet's behavioral needs for play, social contact, and exercise (yes cats need exercise too!) as well as potential problems such as possessiveness or rough play. Address any problems now with a trainer or behaviorist.

When the baby comes home, arrange a quiet introduction where your pet can sniff and investigate the baby in a controlled way. Pair these encounters with petting or treats so your pets enjoy being in the baby's presence.

- **[Archives](#)**

Always closely supervise your pets and your baby. Accidents can happen in a split second. Be watchful of changes in the relationship between your pets and baby. As your baby grows and changes, his behavior will change and this may change your pet's behavior towards him.

For more information locally we regularly offer classes at St. Anthony North Hospital and Littleton Adventist Hospital. Check your local hospital's health education department for classes, or [purchase the CD of our hospital presentation on our website.](#)

- **What's New:**
Webcasts, Workshops and Blogs

We have several exciting new developments that you'll want to take advantage of. First, our telecourses will now also be available via webcast. This means you can choose the option of having the audio come through your internet connection rather than your telephone. You'll be able to ask questions by typing the question into your computer on the webcast page. While many of you in the U.S. may still prefer to use a phone line, this development is most important to our international subscribers. Whether you live in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada or one of several other countries where we know we have subscribers, this exciting development now allows YOU to take our telecourses.

The webcast option will be in place for our [Animal Learning Telecourse](#) that begins June 6. Watch for a special email from us in the next few weeks about a free webcast/teleseminar we'll be doing so you can see how it works.

Second, ABA has finally launched a blog! Check us out at [Behavior Corner.com/blog](#). Subscribe to one of the 'feeds' and you'll be notified whenever there is a new posting.

Finally, ABA is proud to partner with Ms. Nancy Williams, an Associate Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist in Maryland, and a good friend and colleague, to present "[Analyzing and Modifying Canine Aggressive Behavior](#)" on September 16th and 17th, 2007. We thank [Ted Terroux](#) for hosting the workshop at his expanded Lakewood facility. Register early, as seating is limited! We hope to see you there!

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