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## Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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### **Dog Piece:** **Simple as Parsimony!**



During a recent presentation at a conference, we were discussing myths surrounding playing tug of war with dogs. We were explaining that tug-of-war is a cooperative game, not a competitive interaction over which individual is going to control the toy.

### Dear Suzanne,

October is a busy, busy travel month for us. Suzanne is gone 17 days, four of those to the [Association of Pet Dog Trainers Conference](#), October 25-28 in Portland Oregon. If you'll be there, be sure and stop by Booth 20 to say hello and redeem your coupon you'll find in your tote bag. Don't miss the combined What's New and Our Piece article in this issue, as although it is long, it describes new websites, products and educational opportunities that will benefit both pet owners and pet parents. Drop us a note at [ezine@AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com](mailto:ezine@AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com) and let us know what you think!

Best wishes,  
Suzanne and Dan

### • **Cat Piece:** **Fearful Felines**

Cats have a reputation of being secretive, aloof creatures. While there may be some truth in this description, it's also true that many cats are not well socialized. What we mean by this is that during their sensitive period for socialization (which research tells us is between the ages of 2-7 weeks) too many young cats are not



Several people in the audience mentioned they had heard playing tug-of-war is a good way to build a dog's "confidence." What exactly does this mean?

One person described that he had been told to play tug to build the dog's confidence in order to decrease his puppy's submissive urination when people would try to pet her during greetings. If she was more confident, she would be less likely to submissively urinate. So, rather than having visitors reach out to pet the puppy, the owner instructed them to pick up a toy and play tug with her. Not surprisingly, this was quite effective stopping the submissive urination.

The technique was effective because it changed the way visitors behaved toward the puppy. Rather than reaching out to pet her, and showing all those behaviors people think are friendly, but are often quite threatening to dogs, (making eye contact, facing them while leaning over them and reaching over their heads to pet them) visitors instead stimulated an alternative behavior - play - that was incompatible with submissive urination.

The dog owner, quite astutely, then commented that the technique worked, but NOT for the reasons he had been told it would work. He was exactly right. The simplest explanation for the effectiveness of the technique is that it removed the events that triggered the behavior (trying to pet the pup) and also engaged the dog in an incompatible behavior (it's hard to urinate when you're happily engaged in a game of tug).

Attributing the effectiveness of the procedure to building the dog's "confidence" is a much more complicated explanation. What does "confidence" mean in terms of dog behavior? Why invoke a more complicated description of personality when a simpler explanation will do?

exposed to a variety of people, unfamiliar places, and other animals, so as adults they can be calm and friendly in a variety of situations and when confronted with unfamiliar circumstances.

This lack of socialization results not only in of fear unfamiliar people, but also of anything that is new and different. Cats that are afraid spend a lot of time hiding and trying to avoid the things they are afraid of.

While hiding is a normal behavior that allows cats to adjust to changes, cats that spend most of their time hiding are not enjoying a good quality of life. Cats that are always on the look out for another pet that is harassing them, trying to stay clear of children whose behavior frightens them, or sequester themselves in one or two rooms because they just can't cope with a larger world are under stress.

In severe cases, veterinarians tells us that chronic stress contributes to stress linked diseases such as irritable bowel syndrome and can exacerbate other chronic conditions such as diabetes. When hiding and avoidance replace the majority of other normal cat behaviors, owners should take action.

The first step is to determine what your cat is afraid of. If possible try to protect your cat from unexpectedly encountering whatever he is afraid of. This may mean keeping cats separated temporarily or putting up a baby gate to keep kids and cats away from each other.

Next, stage planned encounters with whatever your cat is afraid of. This might entail corralling your child, sitting on the floor with him or her, opening a can of tuna, and encouraging your cat to approach. This is the first step in what can be a long process of convincing your cat that kids = goodies. Of course there will be many subsequent steps in this process. Just because your cat isn't afraid when your child is sitting quietly on the floor doesn't mean he won't be afraid when your kids are chasing each other up and down the hallway.

When introducing a cat to a new home, or to a

Using the simplest explanation to explain observations is called parsimony, and is an important, basic principle in the study of animal behavior. Also known as Occum's Razor, parsimony dictates that it is not only unnecessary, but also inappropriate to choose a complicated explanation to explain observations of behavior, when a simpler one will do.

A number of years ago, Suzanne was a guest on the popular television series "Unsolved Mysteries". This particular episode was all about animals and why they sometimes displayed "heroic" behavior and saved the lives of their owners or others. One example was a Newfoundland that saved a person from drowning whose boat had overturned in a river. The question put to Suzanne was how did the dog know that the person was drowning and needed saving? Her answer was - he didn't.

The Newfie's owner routinely took the dog to the river to swim and play, and the dog was in the habit of retrieving large logs that often floated down the river. In Suzanne's view, at a distance, the drowning person resembled the large logs the dog had retrieved many, many times. So, the most parsimonious explanation for the dog's behavior was that he was doing what he had always done - retrieve floating logs.

When we choose the simplest explanation for an animal's behavior, not only are we more likely to be correct, it's also more likely that we can take the appropriate steps to modify the animal's behavior, should that be necessary.

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**At last, the 5 Disc DVD of  
our September  
"Understanding and  
Modifying Canine  
Aggressive Behavior" is**

new pet, providing a variety of hiding places in several different locations can help the cat adjust to these changes. A hiding place can be as simple as a cardboard box or a paper bag on the floor. Elevated hiding places are even better. By providing more hiding places that are more integrated into the general living environment, you may be able to prevent your cat from relegating herself to the basement or under the bed.

So while providing a quality environment for cats includes providing hiding places and elevated perches, cats should be using them temporarily, during times of change or when they just need a little quiet time. If you feel your cat is spending too much time hiding and you don't know what to do about it, visit [www.CertifiedAnimalBehaviorist.com](http://www.CertifiedAnimalBehaviorist.com) to find a certified animal behaviorist who works with cats. Or ask your veterinarian to refer you to a veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant who specializes in cat behavior.

• **Our Piece &  
What's New at ABA  
BIG Changes at ABA**

We know our faithful ezine readers are looking for quality, helpful, scientific information about pet behavior. Many of you who are pet professionals of one sort or another lament to us how difficult it is to find courses and other educational opportunities that are easily accessible and affordable to help you expand your knowledge and provide better behavior care and services.

Many pet parents who contact us are confused and frustrated because they receive conflicting information from those they contact for help. Dog owners are not enthusiastic about buying into the "you must be dominant" mantra, but really don't know what else to do and have been frightened into believing that's the one and only answer to any and all problems they are having with their dogs. Cat owners have far fewer resources available to them.

Pet professionals who are dedicated to helping pet owners use the most effective, yet most humane methods, based on scientific knowledge about pet behavior, are frustrated and angry when they see well intentioned people uncritically buy into methods that fly in

**available.**

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**Also, the long awaited, updated, expanded DVD program "[Helping Fido Welcome Your Baby](#)" is also ready. Available as an audio CD as well.**

the face of what we know scientifically about behavior because they are promoted by charismatic personalities with killer marketing.

Part of the cause of all these circumstances is that the most highly trained, best educated, and most experienced behaviorists and trainers do not have, or have not created anywhere near enough outlets to disseminate their knowledge.

We are trying to do our part with 3 new websites -  
[www.BehaviorEducationNetwork.com](http://www.BehaviorEducationNetwork.com) - Get BEN  
[www.HelpingFido.com](http://www.HelpingFido.com) - Every dog (and owner) needs a little help now and then  
[www.HelpingKitty.com](http://www.HelpingKitty.com) - Want a purrfect cat? Be a purrfect cat owner!

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### Quick Links...

- [Our Website](#)
- [Products](#)
- [Services](#)
- [More About Us](#)
- [Archives](#)

While temporarily part of [AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com](http://AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com) these three new sites will soon be loaded with many resources in different formats - e-booklets, audio CDs, DVDs, and interactive services such as teleclasses and webinars. Each site is geared to a specific audience.

BEN is for pet professionals, with sections for veterinary professionals, trainers, and shelters. While many of BEN's resources will be available to all, BEN members will receive discounts on telecourses and webinars, and have access to members only courses and recordings of our past presentations at conferences. You will have the benefit of hearing from not just us, but other quality presenters as well. In addition to Pia Silvani, CPDT who has taught the extremely popular "[Becoming a Great Dog Training Instructor](#)" course for us for several years, Karen London, PhD., CAAB, Crista Coppola, Ph.D., CAAB and Nancy Williams, M.A., ACAAB, RVT, are the first of many who will be joining us to share their knowledge and expertise about many facets of dog and cat behavior.

[HelpingFido.com](http://HelpingFido.com) is obviously for dog owners seeking information about and assistance for their concerns about their dogs' behaviors. Our introductory product is the DVD "[Helping Fido Welcome Your Baby](#)" which is an expanded version of our CD program many of you have requested and been waiting for. Coming soon

is the DVD "Helping Fido Be Happy Home Alone". Also available will be what we've tentatively titled our "Getting Started" series. These e-mini- books and CDs will answer the initial questions dog owners have when they decide they, and their dogs, need behavioral assistance. The "Getting Started When Your Dog is Aggressive to People" for example answers

"can I change this behavior?"

"can I trust my dog around children or visitors or the family?"

"will my dog bite someone?"

"am I going to be able to keep my dog?"

"why is he doing this?"

"is this my fault?"

"what's the 'success rate' for these problems?"

While these are complicated questions without simple answers, we attempt to provide dog owners with realistic answers that will help guide them when they seek additional help from a trainer, behavior consultant, or veterinarian.

[HelpingKitty.com](http://HelpingKitty.com) is HelpingFido's counterpart and will soon be home to the updated DVDs "Helping Cats Co- Exist", and "Creating the Purrfect Litterbox"

Pet professionals should watch for our affiliate programs which will not only make it easy for you to give your clients and customers easy access to [HelpingKitty.com](http://HelpingKitty.com) and [HelpingFido.com](http://HelpingFido.com) resources but will also reward you for doing so

So, as you can see, BIG changes are underway at ABA. Perhaps we should have waited to announce these sites until they were more fully developed, but we wanted you, our loyal ezine readers to be the first to know about them. We welcome your suggestions as these sites take shape and we promise to keep you informed as they do.

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