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## Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dear Suzanne,

When you read this we will be in Ohio on business for a few days. Be sure and check out our new CD product and read about the winners of our photo contest! Happy spring - we can't wait to get out of our spring time pattern of 70 degree days followed by snow. Bring on summer!

Suzanne and Dan

### • **Cat Piece:** **Tales Cat Tails Can Tell**

One key to understanding the motivation and emotions of animals is their body language. Among the most expressive body parts of our four-legged friends are their tails.



In cats, the position and movement of the tail can help indicate mood and intentions. For example, cats that are fearful tend to hold their tails down and tuck them underneath their legs. Cats that are agitated and threatening will lash their tails back and forth. What does it mean when a cat holds his

### **Dog Piece:** **Unconditional Love From Dogs**



We recently saw a comic strip that portrayed a dog being adopted from a shelter with the caption "Unconditional love - guaranteed." We've also heard the statement made in other

contexts that dogs give

**"unconditional" love. When examined closely, this statement implies something about the nature of dogs that is an exaggeration at best and at worst, a myth. Such exaggerations can lead to unrealistic expectations from people who have dogs or those looking to adopt dogs. These unrealistic expectations can lead to frustration, unhappiness with the pet and sometimes, the dog being given up or euthanized. This is not in the best interests of pets or people.**

**The statement that dogs love unconditionally is an exaggeration for several reasons, one of which is that all dogs unconditionally "love" everyone - not just some people, but everyone. While it is true that dogs seem predisposed to form long-term relationships and develop strong bonds with people (what we'll call love), not all dogs "love" all people. The roughly 300,000 people that have to undergo medical treatment for dog bites every year will probably attest to that.**

**The factors that determine the strength of a bond between a dog and a person are not completely understood. We do know that the quality and quantity of interactions with people, especially when a dog is young, can influence his propensity to form strong bonds with people. Certainly the specific interactions the dog has with particular people can also influence his behavior towards them.**

**For example, a dog that has had some bad experiences with people threatening or frightening him, can be aggressive to people in certain circumstances. Such a dog may love his family, but not other people.**

**Even dogs that are strongly**

**tail straight up when approaching another individual?**

This tail-up posture is not only an indicator of friendliness, but also serves as a friendly social signal, according to research by Charlotte Cameron- Beaumont. She observed interactions among feral cats and found that the tail up posture tended to precede other friendly behaviors including sniffing and face rubbing

To show that it really was the tail position, and not other behaviors or postures that were signaling friendliness, she performed an experiment. Cameron- Beaumont presented cats with cardboard silhouettes of other cats that either had the tail up vertically or the tail down below the horizontal plane.

She found the cats exposed to the tail up models tended to raise their own tails and approach the silhouette more quickly than cats exposed to the tail down silhouettes. Cats exposed to the tail up model were also less likely to respond with tail lashing or tucking their tails. What the tail up posture probably signals is that the cat showing it isn't a threat to other cats or people and intends to engage in friendly behavior.

An interesting application of this information involves introducing unfamiliar cats to each other, such as when a family brings home a new cat to join their resident cats. The initial interactions between cats are very important, and if the cats can be friendly and relaxed, it will reduce stress and make for a smoother introduction.

If both the new cat and the resident cat could be induced to raise their tails at the sight of the other cat, it might facilitate friendly interactions. It is certainly possible to train cats to engage in a variety of behaviors on cue and training cats to raising their tails should be possible. Using clicker training to teach the cat to raise his tail on cue would be one way to do this.

It may be difficult to get a fearful or threatening cat to raise his tail, because of the way that

attached to their owners or other familiar people may not always be friendly to them. We have seen numerous cases of dogs that were very bonded to family members but would become aggressive around possessions or when disturbed when resting or sleeping.

The complexity of human-dog relationships certainly has parallels with human-human relationships. Even in the most loving of human relationships there are varying degrees of conflict. Some dogs are more aloof than others. Dogs that are not well socialized may be afraid of most folks or even aggressive to them.

The unfortunate implication of the phrase "unconditional love" is that a dog possessing this trait would never hurt anyone, never do anything to displease his owner, and would always be a dream companion. This just isn't true. There may be some dogs that do meet the needs and expectations of their owners, most of the time, but the old saying - you can't please all the people all the time - holds true for dogs as well.

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***One of our latest (and most popular) telecourses "Managing the Home Alone Dog" is now available on CD. This presentation goes over the various causes for home alone problems, including how to identify, prevent, manage and resolve them.***

***An excellent companion to "Managing the Home Alone Dog" is "Using Counter Conditioning and Desensitization Techniques Effectively to Modify***

strong emotions influence behavior, but if the cat isn't already fearful or threatening, having him show the tail up posture may facilitate further friendly interactions and make the introduction more successful. The alternative might be to strap a cardboard cut-out of a tail on the cat's back and hope the other cat thinks it's real (just kidding!)

- **Our Piece:**  
**Bark Collars, Quick Fix?**

A reader asked a question we would like to respond to. Our reader asks "I know how difficult barking issues can be, but the citronella bark collars seem a quick fix. How do you justify using them?"



This question could be answered on many levels, but let's start by defining what might be meant by a "quick fix". To us, this is any technique that results in at least short-term suppression of or even "improvement" in a behavior but because the underlying cause of, or motivation for the behavior hasn't been addressed, the problem is likely to re-occur or manifest itself through other unwanted behaviors.

An example might be using a bark collar to stop a dog from barking when left alone due to separation anxiety. Or perhaps confining a cat that is urinating on the carpet to a room with a tile floor (and no rugs). In the first instance, the dog may stop barking, but his anxiety might be manifest with destructive behavior, escape attempts, or self injurious behaviors. The cat may use the litterbox in the tiled room, but as soon as she has access to carpet she relieves herself on it because the reason why she prefers carpet over the litterbox hasn't been addressed.

Pet owners ultimately become frustrated with a "quick fix" approach because it often doesn't result in long-term behavior changes. However, a particular tool or training technique, doesn't have to inherently be a "quick fix, because when used with another

***Behavior." This CD explains the different strategies and techniques to use to modify many of the common behavior problems of the home alone dog.***

***For the month of May buy both CD's, and receive 10% off! Enter the coupon code MAY SPECIAL in the shopping cart to receive discount.***

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problem, may constitute a reasonable behavior modification approach.

Let's say our example dog routinely barks at delivery trucks when left alone, which happen to pass by his house frequently. The dog's owner can manage the barking when he's there, but has no way to stop it when he's not. His neighbors are complaining. Using a bark collar to suppress the dog's home alone barking in this instance is, to us, a reasonable approach. The dog isn't fearful, he's just enjoying barking. By not barking, the dog can develop a new "habit" of what to do when he hears the trucks, especially if the owner has worked to teach an alternative behavior when he's home with the dog.

With our cat example short term confinement can be used to prevent the cat from continuing to soil an area while offering the cat a variety of litterboxes with different substrates to find something that better meets the cat's behavioral preferences.

Thus the bark collar and confinement have been used as part of a more comprehensive plan to address a problem rather than as the sole attempt to resolve the problem. It's all part of being able to determine what's the "right tool for the job" for a particular behavior, a particular pet, pet owner, and specific environment. The more experience and education one has in the science of animal behavior and learning, the better able one is to critically evaluate tools and techniques for a specific use, rather than trying the latest thing promoted at a weekend seminar or seen on television.

## • **What's New:**

### Photo Contest Winners

**In last month's ezine we put out a request for photographs of pet professionals working with pets in whatever their capacity. We intend to use these on our new membership site - BehaviorEducationNetwork.com. While we aren't quite ready to unveil the site, we have chosen the winners of our photo contest. Each receives a free month's subscription to BEN when it launches. Congratulations to**

**Hans van Heesbeen, Australian Dog Trainers Academy Victoria, Australia. Linda L. McLaren, Baltimore, MD. Rachel Green, Woof**

**Woof Training, Columbus, Ohio. Michele Giarrusso, Great Dogs USA Edinburg, VA. Mike Rueb, Bideawee Animal Shelter, New York. Leslie Kloman, It's All About the Dog, Denver CO.**

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<http://www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com>

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**Thanks again to all who submitted photos and we can't wait for everyone to see the winners on BEN! Stay tuned!**