

# DOG SYMPOSIUM 2015



## Both ends of the leash

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One never leaves the Dog Symposium without a burning desire to do more, or better, for one's dog. This year was no different. The exceptionally high-quality presentations led us on a spellbinding trip through aggression and disease, feeding, tactile stimulation and mental health in dogs, with a look at the human end of the leash as well. We came away well fed, well stimulated, and well laughed.

We hope you enjoy the summary, although it cannot do justice to the depth of the presentations, or catch the laughter or the conversations around the dinner table.

Don't forget to join us next year with a new line-up of top speakers. The date is 6-7 February 2016, and the meeting will again be held at Olavsgaard Hotel – the place with free ice cream and popcorn in the seminar lobby.



# A deeper understanding of aggression in the dog

**Amber Batson BVETMED MRCVS**  
**Priory Vets, Reigate, Surrey, UK**

*Amber Batson qualified as a vet from the Royal Veterinary College, London in 1999 and immediately developed a strong interest in animal behaviour. She undertook several qualifications in canine, feline and equine behaviour and welfare and regularly consults and teaches in animal behaviour as well as providing welfare consultancy and legal advice for many national and international animal organisations.*



## Types of aggression in the dog

For many reasons, dog aggression is an issue that has to be taken very seriously, and Amber began by explaining the different types. There is aggression resulting from **fear and pain**, which covers a huge range of behaviour including territoriality and fear transferred from the parents. Then there is **learnt aggression**, whereby the dog has learnt that its behaviour makes the undesired thing go away. However, not all aggression is related to these. There is the **natural predatory behaviour** of chasing anything that moves, whether animal or otherwise. It can include chasing bikes and balls and nipping at tyres, but can also be caused by other factors. **Redirected aggression**, like biting another dog or a human that poses no threat, occurs when the dog is unable to direct the behaviour at the threat itself, like being restrained by the owner or behind a barrier, or from fear of punishment. Finally, idiopathic aggression, which is so rare that Amber has never encountered it, means that it has an undetermined cause.

Amber went on to explain with excellent clarity why **dominance** is not included in the list. Recent research has dispelled the myth, which is propagated from outdated textbooks (before 2008) and people unfamiliar with the findings of the last few years. Dominance aggression is often mistakenly used to describe fear aggression.

The **body language of aggression** was reviewed, including body postures and behaviours leading up to an episode (if the threat is not removed) as summarized in the Kendal Shepherd Ladder of

Aggression. The whole point of a ladder is that the dog can also climb back down it. Amber looked at a number of examples, such as a dog growling at the vet, a bitch with newborn pups growling at its owner, dogs chasing cars, a dog biting its owner after being agitated by a cat, a dog in a kennel biting the handler when he opens the door, and so on.

## Recipe for aggression

Some dogs seem to develop aggression problems almost readily. Other dogs, even despite some negative experiences, never show aggression ... What causes dogs to 'choose' aggression over submission?

We looked at why some dogs only show offensive aggression. The main denominator is fear or pain, but Amber described a host of other factors, among them genetic memory, which is encoded in the genes and passed to the next generation. Early weaning, limited resources, poor socialisation, breed-induced body posture and inappropriate feeding are just a few of the many other dynamics underlying aggression.

## Physiology of aggression

The **physiology of aggression** is a very important aspect of this behaviour, and Amber spent a fair amount of time taking us through its complexities. Reduced serotonin and increased catecholamine (dopamine, adrenaline) activity play a significant part, and we looked at how these are brought about and what can be done

about them. The list of factors includes poor sleep, lack of chewing, lack of play, inability to make choices, few puzzle-solving opportunities, lack of dietary tryptophan (from increased sugars and high protein diets), poor intestinal absorption, and pain.

## Disease and aggression

Following on from the physiology, Amber looked at disease and its role in aggression.

### Pain

This extensive topic examined chronic versus acute pain and their definitions. What is more important from the point of view of management is to understand whether a certain pain is **adaptive or maladaptive**. Adaptive pain helps protect injured tissues and maintain overall homeostasis. Maladaptive pain does little to help injured tissue and affects the body's overall ability to maintain its internal balance (homeostasis). Chronic, maladaptive pain can result, for example, from problems with the ears, skin, eyes, and abdomen. Head pain, back pain, neck pain, dental pain, are all terribly unpleasant for the dog and hard to communicate to the owner. Plus, some dogs can be in terrible pain while others hardly feel anything with the same problem. Even in humans there are big differences in our pain perception. This is affected in particular by serotonin production related to e.g. genetics, chronic stress, Cushing's disease, early life stress, and wind-up. **Wind-up** and **allodynia** are the main features of maladaptive, chronic pain. Wind-up is heightened sensitivity resulting in altered pain thresholds both peripherally and centrally. It is also called sensitisation. **Allodynia** is pain resulting from a stimulus that does not normally cause pain, like a light skin touch. It is a recognised syndrome in maladaptive pain.

### Stress

After a look at brain chemistry, including neurotransmitters and the hypothalamic-pituitary axis, Amber went on to address the issue of **stress** and its role in aggression.

Acute stress lasts seconds to several minutes and involves the sympathetic nervous system. There is increased production of adrenaline, noradrenaline, dopamine and neurotransmitters. Their aim is to get the body to move faster, increase blood

to the muscles, reduce digestion, and prepare the body for injury.

Chronic stress involves the production of glucocorticoids. It starts within a few minutes and can last for a few minutes, hours, days, or even weeks. The aim is to dampen acute stress changes, keep the body more active, and switch off longer term energy-rich projects like pregnancy, immunity, and sleep.

To understand the causes of stress, we have to understand its relationship to the dog's ethogram (inventory of behaviours or actions exhibited by that species). The dog has a set of inelastic behaviours, which are essential, and elastic behaviours that are not. The inelastic behaviours are body care, ingestion, and sleep. These are essentials that will lead to frustration if they are not fulfilled. In the wild a dog can get away from a threat, and if it doesn't, it dies. End of story. But in our domesticated world it is often unable to escape, and the stress levels, which in the wild are expected to last no more than half an hour or so, become chronic. Elastic behaviours are matters of choice. A dog can choose not to play on a certain day, but it needs to urinate (which is an inelastic behaviour). Preventing the dog from relieving itself leads to frustration. If we think about it, the domestic dog is the only species that is not allowed to relieve itself when it wants to. Frustration of goals, fear, over-excitement, and overstimulation lead to chronic stress.

### Chicken or egg?

Pain causes stress, and chronic stress worsens pain.

Recognising pain, and treating with medication to reduce pain, is an important part of reducing chronic stress and preventing 'wind up'. We looked at different ways of helping dogs cope with chronic pain, such as relaxing the muscles, administering pain medication, reducing chronic stress, and encouraging the release of serotonin through chewing, sleeping, puzzle solving, calm exercise, and serotonin enhancing medications like amitriptyline.

### Why does disease affect aggression?

In a nutshell, disease causes reduced serotonin activity, increased catecholamine levels (dopamine and adrenaline), reduced blood sugar levels, and pain. Disease also makes resources more

valuable, as getting them is more difficult. Food, water, increased space requirements to avoid being touched, and a need for more or less warmth are among these.

Diseases affecting catecholamines include Cushing's disease, which Amber discussed in some detail. Changes in brain electricity, hypothyroidism, and diseases causing low blood sugar (diabetes, severe small intestinal disease, exocrine pancreatic insufficiency) were also explored in detail.

## Approaching the aggressive case

**Identifying the type of aggression** is primary. For example, predatory aggression is unlikely to be affected by disease. This must be followed by a **full medical assessment** as relevant to the case. This includes a thorough examination (where possible!) to rule out pain, blood tests (including TSH/T4, TLI, cob and folate, glucose), a urine test to check for infection and glucose, and a thorough history to consider partial seizures. It is important to **identify the stressors** to reduce catecholamines and increase serotonin. Avoiding fast exercise and replacing it with slow, calm, easy mental stimulation is key. Increasing the number of meals will prevent low sugars and help reduce the value of the resource. Increased chewing should be encouraged and quality sleep maximised.

Amber finished by looking at practical programs that can be set up, by temporarily removing triggers of the aggression, and meeting all the dog's inelastic behavioural needs. This will help it to rebalance its chemicals. Amber again stressed the need for regular, appropriate feeding and a chewing plan. A careful counter-conditioning programme, based on positive reinforcement only training should be tailored to retrain calmness in the presence of identified triggers.

## Be aware of your limitations

Amber closed by talking a bit about "prognosis" for cure. This depends on how long the problem has been ongoing, the number of contexts it is

shown in, how intense it is, and whether there has been previous training such as punishment-based solutions, which will worsen the prognosis. Amber stressed how important it is for us to be aware of our limitations, because at the end of the day, it is always the dog that pays.



## References:

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# What do dogs eat?

Dr Conor Brady, Dogs First, Ireland

*Dr Conor Brady has a doctorate in animal behaviour, specialising in the effects of nutrition on the behaviour and gut morphology of mammals. After five years as a guide dog trainer, both in Ireland and Australia, he formed Dogs First in 2011. His international seminars, book and Facebook page (Dogs First Ireland) bring a simple message: Stop with the "stuff" (dry and manufactured food, flea treatments, boosters after a year of age, dental sticks, etc.) and go back to basics for major health improvements.*



In a riveting and highly detailed presentation chock-full of references and spiced with Irish humour, Conor led us through the intricacies of dry dog food and how it affects the health of our dogs. Following on from that, backed by extensive research and anecdotal examples, he explained why a carnivorous diet is the best we can do for our canine companion.

## CARNIVORE OR OMNIVORE?

Conor started with the main question of the afternoon: Is the domestic dog a carnivore or an omnivore?

Contrary to what many believe, the dog is in fact a carnivore, and feeding it properly can help avoid many diseases and behavioural problems. The grey wolf too is a complete carnivore. According to Dr David Mech, they show no interest whatsoever in the intestinal contents of their prey. However, the stomach lining and intestinal wall are consumed. (Mech, 2003. Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation (Chapter 4, p123-124, The Wolf as a Carnivore).

Researchers have also examined dingoes and found them to be wholly carnivorous. Even street dogs are carnivorous if left to themselves, but they will accept hand-outs. A study of feral dogs in Italy, which live on hand-outs or forage in garbage, showed that 98% of them are dead by the age of one year. Studies that followed village

dogs out into the wild have shown that, left to their own devices, they are wholly carnivorous.

The dog's physiology and anatomy are important indicators. The shape of the skull, acidity of the stomach, anatomy of the digestive system and presence or absence of various enzymes all point to the dog being a complete carnivore.

Diet studies are of course largely anecdotal. What some of them show is that dogs raised on a certain type of food will prefer it. One study with 100 Chow-chow pups divided them into three groups.

Thirty-three dogs were fed all meat, 33 dogs all vegetables, and 33 a mixture of meat and veg. This was done in the 1960s. They showed that the dogs, which were about 14-15 weeks on the diet, would only eat meat if put on that. Those who were given all veg would only eat veg. Those that were given both would eat both.

**"I'm not going to stand here for three hours and tell you how to feed your dog. It's more important to remove some of the fear, if you are worried that feeding your dog yourself means he's going to get rickets or that his buns are going to fall off."**

This has massive connotations for people who claim that their dog is vegetarian, he loves vegetables, and he's eaten veg since he was a baby. But just because he eats veg has absolutely no bearing on how well the dog is.

Conor continued by addressing in detail the arguments many people have against the dog being a full carnivore and the multitude of examples they have.

## DRY FOOD

Having established that the dog is a carnivore, Conor led us through the intricacies of dry food, and why it cannot be a “complete diet”. Some of the side-effects of dry food are:

- 1 Reliance upon cereal as a filler
- 2 Inadequate protein
- 3 Inadequate vitamin content
- 4 Mineral imbalance
- 5 Old fat!
- 6 Dietary sensitization
- 7 Foul teeth
- 8 Salt
- 9 Additives, Chemicals
- 10 Effect on stools / Anal Glands / Coprophagia

Even if just one of the above could be shown to be true, humans would not want to go near it. It is certainly not a complete diet. Conor took us through each of the ten points in detail.

Fifty per cent of dry food is cereal, and research has shown that this is bad for a carnivore. The quality of the cereal is questionable, plus the fact that it is often wheat, which has gluten. Taking us through the physiology and histology of the gut, Conor showed how gluten causes malabsorption by lining the intestines with a gunk that does not allow the most important nutrients through. It is the number one enemy in dogs today. In particular, the building blocks of the body, proteins, are not absorbed from the little the dog gets. Gluten also leads to recurring skin conditions, gut conditions, itchy toes, ear conditions, recurring itch, hotspots and a host of other things.

Obesity and pancreatitis are two major issues among dogs fed dry food. Nowadays, dogs are up to 50% more likely to suffer pancreatitis than humans. They do not have salivary amylase to break down carbohydrates. This puts huge amounts of stress on the pancreas, which has to work overtime 1) producing amylase and then 2) dealing with the huge spike in blood sugars.

Behaviour is another major issue with carbohydrates. If anyone has ever attended a kids’ party, after all the cake and sweets have been consumed, the kids are climbing the walls. Spiking blood sugar is known to be associated with mood

swings. Dogs switched to a carnivorous diet often show calmer behaviour.

Foul teeth are a major issue in dogs today. Two thirds of them have gum disease by the age of

two years. Conor recommended ascopyllum as a good counteraction to plaque because of its antioxidant properties. Dental sticks, on the other hand, are made mostly of gluten, sugar and salt. Chewing on raw bones keeps plaque at bay.

Additives and chemicals: *if you can’t pronounce it, don’t eat it* is the bottom line. And where poo is concerned, big, sloppy, smelly piles are typical for dogs on dry food. A

carnivore’s droppings are more like pellets than dung and anal gland issues are non-existent.



## Fresh food

The second half of the presentation was devoted to fresh food, its benefits, and how to feed it. Unfortunately there are not a lot of studies showing the benefits of fresh food over dry food, especially on a large scale.

Antech Diagnostics is a major laboratory in the US that performs most analyses for the country’s veterinary schools and universities. They did a study on 200 dogs: 120 dry fed, the rest raw fed. The results were absolutely in favour of feeding raw meat. The blood of raw-fed dogs had a higher packed cell volume, which is a measure of fitness; their immune system was doing less work, so they were healthier. Sadly, the study was only placed on their website. However, simply removing gluten and chemicals is bound to give a dog’s system a few days off.

We then looked at the following health benefits in detail:

- Better coat
- Better skin (reduced skin and ear issues)
- Increased muscle mass / reduced obesity
- Less gastrointestinal upset / disease
- Stronger ligaments and joints with less inflammation
- Better teeth, gums and breath

Fresh Meat 60-80%	Organ 10-20%	Bone ~10%
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beef</li> <li>Lamb</li> <li>Pork</li> <li>Duck</li> <li>Rabbit</li> <li>Kangaroo</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Liver*</li> <li>Kidney</li> <li>Spleen</li> <li>Pancreas</li> <li>Brain</li> <li>Eyes</li> </ul>	
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chicken</li> <li>Turkey</li> </ul>		<b>Other</b>
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fish (from frozen)</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tripe</li> <li>Heart</li> </ul>	<b>Veg</b> 
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eggs</li> </ul>		<b>Extra Bits</b> 

- Reduced coprophagia
- Reduced diabetes
- Reduced pancreatitis
- Better kidney function (less wee, easier to toilet train)
- Better poo (improved anal gland function)
- Reduced liver disease
- Reduced cancer risk
- Better repair
- Better focus & behaviour
- Decreased parasitology

Finally, we looked at the raw diet in detail and Conor encouraged us that it is not easy to get it wrong. To date, nobody on their Facebook page has complained, although if something went wrong it would quickly spread around. Nonetheless he spent a fair bit of time going through all the ins and outs. He stressed that vets are important, and Dogs First has a network of natural vets that they send people to when necessary. However, many dogs changed to a raw diet become healthier, and physical and behavioural issues often resolve themselves.

Conor stressed that raw fish should be frozen first, then defrosted before giving to the dog. Fish have worms that are not found in land-based animals, and dogs do not cope with them well.

For people travelling or otherwise in a hurry, a can of sardines or tuna in brine (not oil) will do fine. Raw meat can be frozen and defrosted any number of times, unlike for human consumption. This is very practical when preparing portions. Conor also explained how to make treats.

### Can I get infected from a raw-fed dog?

Conor finally addressed some common questions, like whether one can get infected from a dog on raw food. The tongue is in fact the cleanest part of a dog's face and mouth. A dog has antibacterial saliva containing lysozymes, and bacteria cannot live on its tongue. Lots of scavenging carnivores have that, but dogs in particular have lots of it. The French Foreign Legion used to bring dogs into battle to lick the wounds of soldiers because of the tongue's antibacterial properties. However, the other end of the dog is a different story. Both raw and dry feed dogs have produce salmonella in their droppings. That is because dry food contains some salmonella because the age of the meat. It should not be a worry; we handle the dry food with our hands all the time. But fresh meat from the supermarket does not contain it. Dogs will, however, always poo some salmonella, so if a child eats some, a doctor's visit is definitely in order.

## Will raw food make my dog aggressive?

Fresh meat does not make a dog aggressive; quite the opposite. In a study of ten Golden Retrievers with aggression issues, feeding them raw meat dropped the aggression to almost nil. Whether it was simply from removing the chemicals and gluten present in dry food, or because fresh meat has lots of vitamins that fuel and calm the brain is unknown, but many behavioural issues have been resolved by taking dogs off dry food. Contrary to what some people believe, feeding chicken to a retriever will not cause him

to eat the birds he retrieves, or chase cows if he is fed beef. The French like to eat raw horsemeat but they don't go around killing people. Raw meat does not cause aggression.

Conor finished by introducing us to his booklet *The Fresh Food Diet for Dogs*, which participants could pick up for free in the conference room.

In his opening statement Conor said, "It's more important to remove some of the fear, if you are worried that feeding your dog yourself means he's going to get rickets or that his buns are going to fall off." By the end of the talk, he had certainly succeeded.

## Helping handlers change

Risë VanFleet, Phd, RPT-S, CDBC, United States

*Risë VanFleet is a licensed psychologist, registered play therapist-supervisor, and certified dog behaviour consultant who directs both the Playful Pooch Program and the Family Enhancement & Play Therapy Center in Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania, USA. She has over 40 years of experience working with children, parents, families, and groups in a variety of mental health, medical, and educational settings. Her work developing Animal Assisted Play Therapy brought her more fully into the dog training/consultation world, and she teaches mental health professionals about canine ethology, development, communication, and behaviour/training for their AAPT work.*



The human half of dog training was the subject of Risë's excellent presentation. Dog trainers often get frustrated with the clients and vice versa, just as play therapists working with small children get frustrated with parents and parents with them. Dog therapists are drawn to their work because they love dogs, but then realize that the dogs are attached to people. It can be a rude awakening. But this must be overcome for the sake of the dogs. The aim of the talk was to help us enhance our skills for working with the human half of the dog-human relationship.

People contact us for help, and we provide suggestions, but they don't follow up on them. They complain that it doesn't work. So what is a canine professional to do? The fact is, most people don't like change. It is a challenge to their sense of con-

trol and predictability. Being able to control things around us, like the dog, brings a sense of security. If an owner finds that they can control their dog with the use of a pinch collar, being told they have to use another method can make them feel they will lose control, and they might resist. We are leading them into the unknown, beyond their frame of reference.

We tend to label people quickly as resistant or compliant. But the questions we should ask ourselves when faced with this scenario are as follows:

- Maybe I didn't understand their concerns
- Maybe they don't understand what I'm asking
- Maybe they don't understand the relevance of my suggestion to their problem

- Maybe I'm expecting too much and need to simply it or practise more.

Risë went on to look at how we engage handlers/owners, and the importance of listening. She stressed the importance of seeing the tone right from the start, by inviting first and being willing to listen. We tend to prematurely think that we know the problem. But even if we think we know the dog's problem, we need to learn about the handlers and their perceptions, personalities and lifestyles. There is no substitute for conversation and relationship building.

**Empathic listening** is a key skill to develop. People have a strong need to be understood. Truly *listening* conveys that we really understand. Repeating some of the things the person says conveys that we have got it. It doesn't have to be perfect; the main thing is to really try to understand, rather than focus on what we are going to say next. Empathy means putting oneself into another person's shoes, and putting our own thoughts on the back burner. In fact, we should listen to handlers the same way we want them to listen to our dogs.

Our communication must be genuine and sincere. People pick up on this right away. It is a good idea to summarise our understanding of what was said, including the feelings and emotions at the root of most of the problem. Acceptance of what they are saying does not mean we agree. We can always state our own views later.

Risë took us through a few examples of client statements and asked how we would respond by restating the main problem.

### Common goals

Risë explained how setting common goals increases cooperation. For example, a client says, "My dog pulls on the leash constantly. I'm sick of being jerked around." The trainer could reply, "That's really frustrating. You'd like to have your dog walk by your side without pulling. I think that would be something we could work on right away."

When making suggestions, we should explicitly refer back to things the client has said. For example, "You mentioned you'd like your dog to be a therapy dog. I've noticed that she tends to jump



## THE INTERVIEW



up a lot. It's important that therapy dogs don't jump up on people, so let's work on polite greetings first."

In order to demonstrate this approach, Risë asked for a volunteer to come up front for a pretend interview with her. Amber Batson played the part of a stricken and resistant owner whose dog is determined to dig up her garden. It was perhaps one of the most entertaining moments of the weekend, punctuated by laughter from the audience. Even the unflappable interviewer lost it a few times, but succeeded excellently in demonstrating how to approach a frustrated client.

### THE DEFAULT IS ACTION

Nothing helps people more than to see a demonstration, as the interview with Amber showed. We should keep our explanations short and answer questions, but if they keep coming, we should demonstrate what we mean.

## Cognitive dissonance

People don't like competing ideas in their heads. Two or more incompatible ideas at the same time is called cognitive dissonance. The brain works to achieve equilibrium, and that means having to change some perceptions in order to restore this balance. All this happens as a thought process, sometimes below the level of awareness. So, if we want people to change, we have to keep the dissonance low. It's important to avoid contradicting the client's previously held beliefs too directly. If we do it too early, before we have a solid relationship, they will change their perceptions and it's unlikely to go in our direction, because we are the new entity in the picture. Similarly, we should avoid criticizing their methods too quickly or forcefully. We should try to avoid criticising their methods too quickly or forcefully. We are trying to make the message palatable, and our timing and tone of voice are crucial. We also need to be straightforward.

For example, a client enters a training centre with a prong collar on his dog. We can say, "Please take that prong collar off your dog right now. We don't allow them here." Or we can say, "I see you have a prong collar on your dog. Can you tell me what prompted you to select that type of collar? Oh, I see, you've been worried about being pulled down. OK, we will see what we can do to help that pulling problem, and then I want to talk with you about some alternatives for equipment." Education about collars comes later in the session.

Risë then looked at a training model for handlers, including why we need to explain and rationalise what we want to do. Then we should demonstrate, with a demo dog and/or the client dog, so the client gets the idea. Next, the client can practise and there is an exchange of feedback between the client and us. We give them something to practise until we meet again. It is important to have a playful atmosphere if we are in a group, but we should minimize the use of candy or food for people. It can be OK for a short fun activity,

but it can easily become gimmicky. High value reinforcers for people are social. These include praise, smiles, friendly eye contact, pats on the back, head nods, and thumbs-up gestures. But most importantly they must be *sincere*.

## THE SECRET OF TACTFULNESS

This is hugely important in consulting work. Instead of criticizing what we don't like, it is better if we tell them what we want them to do instead. It's all right sometimes to say something like, "Try not to bend over so much," but you want to add the part, "Try to stand a bit straighter." We went through a few further examples of how that would work in practice. People are able to take that in better.

**We should listen to handlers the same way we want them to listen to their dogs.**

## WHAT IS YOUR MEASURING STICK?

One of the things to remember is that people who are perfectionists tend to put a lot of pressure on themselves. Sometimes they direct it towards other people and want them to be perfect. When Risë shows videos of her work, people often comment that she's telling them they're good when they are not. But she is not being false; it depends on the measuring stick one uses. If we expect the person's progress to be at high level and they are way below that, then we are being false if we tell them they are doing a good job. The measuring stick should not be high above where they were when they came in through the door the first time. If they are just a little bit better, we can be genuinely happy about it. For example, "That's good. You're getting the idea, you're getting closer." Then the next time perhaps we can get them to a slightly higher level. It is basic shaping.

Risë concluded by encouraging us that people skills can be learned. There are more skills and considerations than she could cover in the space of a morning, but practice at honing these skills will bring results, just as practice brings results in dog training skills. The main thing to remember is that the outcome we want for dogs can only be achieved through their owners.

# Tactile Stimulation

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Carina Ulvestad, presented by Turid Rugaas\*

*Carina Ulvestad is adventurous single mum to toddler Leonora and the three Yorkies Mishka, Ronja and Ylva. She attended the Turid Rugaas Dog Trainer/Behaviourist School and chose to write her final exam on the subject of tactile stimulation. It has shown great results on both two and four-legged individuals.*

Turid started by explaining that there is a widespread belief among working dog circles that the dog should not be touched, because it is a "working dog". Imagine if this were said to humans: "Sorry, you are a working person, you can't be touched." She said that her own dog was a working dog before he was rehomed with her, and was not touched for three years before she got him.

The skin is the largest organ in the body, and is covered in sensory nerves. This is essential for survival, and people who have conditions where these nerves do not work are at constant risk. Tactile stimulation involves these superficial nerves, not the deeper muscles. The nerves in fact respond best to slow input, like a slow stroke.

## Make it a habit

Tactile stimulation is something we should turn into a habit. Having good habits releases the brain to focus on other things, such as learning. Touching our dog should come automatically. Animals do it all the time. Dogs like to lie close to each other; most of their touching is done by touch, not by playing or jumping on each other. Turid's three cats, for example, like to lie in a heap in one small chair. All kinds of animals do this. So touching is important and necessary. It should also become a habit from the dog's side.

## Touching is necessary

Some kind of tactile stimulation is used everywhere in the world, on young and old alike. Quite a few studies have been done especially in Sweden, by researchers such as Kerstin Uvnas Moberg, a physician specialising in neurophysiology, and elsewhere by e.g. Line Løken. Animal studies show that stimulating touch, through lick-

ing and grooming, increases the production of oxytocin. Human studies show that an affectionate, maternal touch of the infant (stroking, kissing) and skin-to-skin contact both increase oxytocin levels. Oxytocin is released when adults both give and receive pleasant touch (hugging, holding hands, massage). Touching is hugely important. Baby animals stay very close to their mum. It is true of foals, goats, cats and dogs and all animals. It gives them a feeling of safety, it is pleasant, and touching is necessary for the relationship.

## How to do it

Tactile stimulation should be done as follows: very, very slowly, at about 3cm per second, with the flat of the hand just touching, not pressing on, the dog.

The best way to start with a dog that has never been stroked is to find a quiet place to be together, and let the dog relax. Then just gently touch whichever area is closest or most easily accessible. And let him move away if he wants to. The most important thing to remember is that dogs hate being restricted. It is one of the worst things one can do to a dog. They cope very well with small pain like a needle at the vet's, but not with being held tightly and restricted. When Turid started with her own dog, he would move off after just one stroke. It took two to three years before he would let her stroke him for a longer time, but that was okay; it was his choice.

Tactile stimulation should become a habit. When we get to the point where the dog actually accepts being stroked, we can start doing it systematically. Studies with people have found that the production of oxytocin starts after about 15-20 minutes of stroking. Oxytocin causes relaxation and is also a pain reliever.

Once the dog accepts it, we should stroke slowly and gently all over the dog, except for the paws. Dogs do not like having their paws touched as it is close to the bone and nails. Tactile stimulation is superficial but is most pleasant when there is tissue underneath. We should do it for 15-20 minutes every day for a couple of weeks. We can then do it less, like three or four times a week, and just keep it up that way. We will really see the effects then, with the dog really enjoying it and relaxing. The dog will develop a habit of being touched and that will help him relax together with us, which is a real benefit.



Tactile stimulation is not like massage; it does not penetrate into the muscles. It is just very light stroking. The recipe for use is: 1) slow strokes, so slow that you move the hand approximately 3 cm per second; and 2) it has to be with the flat hand, just on the surface. Going slowly enough will stimulate the sensory nerves on the surface of the skin.

Turid got the participants to practise stroking each other, a fun moment that had us all relaxing and laughing.

It is such an easy thing to do that anyone with a hand can do it. It can be done on all dogs, including those that are handicapped, blind or deaf – perhaps even more so then. It can be done on any age of dog. Turid said that it is the one thing she really recommends for every dog. Very often there is a limit to what a dog can do and has the energy to do, but they will enjoy the tactile stimulation a lot. All dogs, like people, occasionally have some pain here and there, and oxytocin caused by tactile stimulation helps to relieve it.

Interestingly, it has been shown that when therapy dogs are petted by people, the human's pulse slows but that of the dog rises. Dogs do not enjoy being petted or patted. By contrast, during tactile stimulation the dog's pulse usually drops.

### Thundershirts

Thundershirts work by applying constant pressure on the dog. They are promoted as calming and the solution to fear of thunder or fireworks. However, Turid has seen that dogs carrying rucksacks or equipment in the mountains do not like having the pack put on. They freeze. She has also observed dogs with thundershirts on, and is of the opinion that this is what they are doing. They are not calm; they freeze because they find it very unpleasant. Amber Batson, who as a vet sees this often, agreed with her. As with many other issues, it is a gadget that is treating the symptoms, not the problem.

\* Carina Ulvestad was unable to attend due to illness. We wish her a speedy recovery.

# What has the nose to do with mental health?

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Anne Lill Kvam, Norway

*Anne Lill started her work with dogs in 1986, when she educated her own search & rescue dog in Norway. In 1995 she studied at the Turid Rugaas' Dog Trainer School, and since then has worked full time with dogs. From 1997 to 2000 she worked in Angola, training dogs to detect land mines and educating local dog handlers. Her philosophy and personal experience with animals evokes their natural intelligence without the use of punishment and hostility. She offers a shift in attitude towards the animals that includes sensitivity to their needs and the wisdom to care for those needs. She is the author of several books and DVDs.*



Anne Lill started by introducing her dream – That every dog is given the opportunity to fulfil his natural gifts and enjoy some type of fun and satisfying nosework every day. And, included in that dream is that dogs will never be walked on a collar.

## What is mental health?

According to the Norwegian Rådet för Psykisk Helse (Council for Mental Health), the prerequisites for feeling well mentally are 1) being together with other people, 2) doing things you like and are good at, 3) eating good and healthy food, 4) sleeping normally, and 5) engaging in some sort of activity. In other words, doing something enjoyable, together with someone we like, is what we need to stay mentally healthy. Some years ago, a Norwegian survey found that people considered the following necessary in order to thrive: 1) having good friends, 2) doing work that we like, 3) having a safe home, 4) engaging in meaningful activities, and 5) having a comfortable economy. Note that economy (including food) is last. However, there are not many hungry people in Norway. But we easily develop depression and other mental problems if we lose our work, if there are conflicts in the family, or if we don't have enough money.

This also applies to dogs, because they have the same limbic system we do. They are capable of feeling the same emotions. They therefore need to have the scope to use their abilities and move around freely and be together with others, among a host of other things.

Anne Lill took us through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and showed how it applies just as well to dogs as to humans. Anne Lill explained why it is important for our dogs to have real dog friends, not just ones they meet on an off and sniff for a few seconds. People too need closer friends than those they bump into at the supermarket.

## Importance of the senses

Humans and all animals need sensual stimulation to develop and to feel well and content. *How* we get it is not as important as the fact that we get it. The impacts we get from our senses are important for the memory. The more senses are involved, the more areas of the brain are stimulated, and the more we remember. If we want somebody to remember something, they will do it better if there is some emotion attached to it.

That means that if we are exposed to a calmly enriched environment right after a lesson, we will remember more. Learning is also enhanced by

light exercise, like a 5-minute moderate walk. This seems to be the same with dogs. The best thing after a lesson is not necessarily to put him back in the car, but to take him for a short, calm stroll in a safe area.

## Some facts about the senses

They all work together. For example, when we have poor balance, it can reduce the brain's ability to compile visual impressions. We have all heard about how some senses can compensate for others that are missing, like blind people having a particularly developed sense of hearing or touch.

Anne Lill went on to explain how we can all be tricked by our eyes sometimes, but that doesn't happen with smell, because of the way our brains are wired. The same is true of dogs.

We were shown a wonderful little video by Alexandra Horowicz on how dogs "see" with their noses. The sense of smell is very primal.

## Mental stimulation for dogs

A dog's brain is stimulated far more by searching for something than being given it. It uses all their senses, gifts and abilities. The same is true of other animals, like horses.

## Why nosework?

The answer would be, why not? Nosework is the meaning of life for dogs; it is their work arena. It is calming, it stimulates self-confidence, it is satisfying and makes the dog feel well and content. The dog becomes less aggressive and reactive because of the pleasure of searching for something, rather than being given it. The result is less stress and improved skill at handling the world around them. And the bottom line: a happy dog makes a happy owner. Anne Lill gave an example of an owner in Spain whose dog would growl when being groomed. But after a day of nosework, the dog didn't protest at all.



## How do you know whether a dog is happy or not?

Humans can simply express how they are feeling. Dogs can too, but often we don't see it. This is particularly true of breeds that hide part of the face or with difficult colouring. For example, with a Shih Tzu there is hair everywhere and one has to know the dog. One cannot see the eyes, only the tongue sometimes when it comes out, and the only expression one sees of the tail is when it is wagging.

Anne-Lill gives nosework to all her clients, and whatever other advice is needed as well, but nosework does so much for the good of the dog in so many situations. One of the problems she encounters is learned helplessness. It occurs after being exposed to high stress with no chance to do anything about the situation. Next time the situation occurs, the dog doesn't even try to get out of it, even if it could. It remains passive. It is a result of having no choices in life and too many

commands. It is not desired in humans; in fact it is considered a disease. But sadly, many people want it in their dog because they think he is being calm.

The best approach to help a dog is to give it balanced activities. Too many dogs are physically over-stimulated but mentally under-stimulated. Many people walk puppies and young dogs far too much and too fast, and forget that they have a brain. The dogs get increasingly frustrated, so the owners run more with them, and the dogs get even more frustrated. It is a vicious circle.

Every dog can search for treats. Searching for a plush toy is fun, not only for the dog but for children too. Brain games, enriched environments, balance and other physical challenges all contribute to making dog feel fulfilled. Giving choices and varying walks are very important, as well as visiting different places. Tracking, and scent games like searching for teabags, mushrooms, keys etc. are a great way to use the dog's brain.

Dogs are naturally very curious. We need to allow them to be so. Humans tend to dislike it and to train their dogs to be passive. Being denied the opportunity to act and do things on their own initiative leads to passivity and learned helplessness. A great treat for a dog is to allow him to sniff a shopping bag full of stuff from the supermarket. There are so many smells in there.

It is so important to let our dogs take their time sniffing when out on a walk. How many of us really let them do that? Imagine reading a really good book or magazine and someone comes and drags you out of your chair. It doesn't do much for your relationship if they do it every time you start reading! That's exactly what it does for our dogs when we drag them away from a really interesting smell. A very short leash isn't going to do much for the dog either. It should be at least 3 metres long to allow the dog plenty of leeway while we walk along.

Searching for treats is THE best activity for dogs. We should make it challenging, but not impossible. We can hide treats in newspaper, boxes filled with balls or pinecones or other things, or bury them in piles of leaves, throw them in the grass... The task should last for a while, and the better the dog gets at it, the longer it can last. The sausage tree is a fantastic game for a dog. It is a game of endless variations. It can be done with palm trees, holes in concrete walls, in the bark of

trees, wherever a treat will fit. Of course not in dangerous or poisonous places. Dogs love it, and all it takes is 10-20 minutes of nosework to make the dog happy for the day. Then he just needs to go to the toilet and a little exercise, and he's happy. We don't need to run them for two hours, as many people think.

## Enriched environments

This is gaining increasing attention among humans, and there is an emerging industry to create sense rooms in nurseries, kindergartens, schools, nursing homes and hospitals. This has been done for years with dogs, with excellent results. They do it naturally too: a dead seagull is an enriched environment! Unfortunately the dog may roll in it, and it's then time for a bath, but he will be incredibly stimulated. We can create enriched environments inside or outside, the latter being the easiest. Just taking things out of context can be interesting, like a car blanket put in the garden. A fun thing to try is one drop of something in a bucket of water. It can be a drop of milk, blueberry juice or whatever. For some reason, Tabasco seems to be a winner! They may try a bit; they do not intend to drink it, but to taste. Often when we are out with our dogs they may want to drink from dirty water on the road, in order to taste it. Depending on where we live, or course, we have to discern whether it could be poisonous, but in general it is fine to let them do it.

Very often in enriched environments we forget the sense of hearing and touch. Different surfaces are excellent. Toys are not always a good idea to put in an enriched environment because many dogs have various associations, like play, and can get distracted.

## Physical challenges

These are very important too. Things like putting a ladder on the ground and letting the dog walk over it, or letting the dog climb over things. Many dogs are not aware of their hind legs. It is good for them to practise using them. Physical challenges are also good for self-confidence. You can either guide the dog slowly with a treat in your hand, in which case it is important to hold the treat close to the ground so the dog can see where he is going. Or the dog can search for treats himself.

## Give choices!

Anne Lill stressed the importance of giving our dogs choices. This includes allowing a dog not to do something. The thundershirt, for example, does not give the dog a choice; it is forced on him. How many of us give the dog the lead when going out for a walk, where we allow him to decide where to go? They may take us to places we would never think of! The only "rule" Anne Lill has with her dog when doing this is that they do

not go into people's gardens or across dangerous roads. Giving a choice of things to chew or play with gives the dog a possibility to change things a bit. They may have favourite chews, for instance, but some days they may choose another one just for the sake of variation. Choices are healthy for feeling in control.

Anne Lill finished by encouraging us all to spread the message, and get owners to give their dogs many more opportunities to play games using their senses in a fulfilling way.