

Modern day living: are we compromising the welfare of our bonded canine companions?

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Introduction

To remain a mutually beneficial association, the human-canine bond needs to be as dynamic as the society it occurs within. Modern owners expect companionship from their dogs, unwittingly demanding that this be achieved within their lifestyle framework. Society pressures may mean this framework is inflexible, and the welfare of the dogs is usually the first to be compromised. The following essay is a discussion of the current findings on the expectations of dog owners, and how training techniques and understanding the benefits and constituents of environmental enrichment may facilitate meeting these expectations.

Discussion

Marston and Bennett (2003) reviewed current research into the processes of dog ownership, relinquishment and adoption, to highlight areas needing further research. Their investigation showed that the human-canine relationship, evolving from its initial establishment 12,000 years ago, is now mainly one requiring the dog to fulfill a companion role. Many dogs are given family member status (Yin, 2002), and their ability to facilitate human social interaction, in particular, benefits the elderly, young and isolated individuals (Marston and Bennett, 2003). Owners were found to be relinquishing their dogs to animal shelters mainly due to accommodation and lifestyle issues, and behaviour other than aggression. Typical problematic behaviours, (for example, hyperactivity, inappropriate chewing and elimination and vocalization) are indicative of anxiety (Juarbe-Diaz, 1997), and if subsequently relinquished, welfare is further compromised by the stress of social isolation and restricted space (Marston and Bennett, 2003).

The success of any animal adoption was proposed by Marston and Bennett (2003) to be intrinsically linked to the new owners having realistic expectations of the time, expense and effort required in owning an animal. Methods suggested to reduce rates of relinquishment included pre-adoption counseling, post-adoption obedience training, and educating new owners as to the importance of environmental enrichment. The latter describes the use of toys, manipulation of feeding regimes and social interaction to address the dogs' need to display innate behaviours (Marston and Bennett, 2003). The areas identified for further research included developing a reflective test for suitability of dogs to be re-homed, describing adopters, and identifying any differences between those who retain their dogs and those who relinquish them.

Hiby et al (2004) undertook a survey of dog owners in the United Kingdom to establish a link between training methods of dogs, their performance in their trained tasks and the emergence of problematic behaviours. Using simple and open-ended questions they collected training descriptions and estimated the dog's obedience for each of seven tasks. Owners were also asked rate the frequency with which their dog displayed a range of problematic behaviours. Punishment-based training in any training regime was associated with increased numbers of problematic behaviours, and was the most ineffective training tool for the tasks surveyed. Reward-based methods, in this instance, were associated with higher levels of obedience and reduced problematic behaviours, providing evidence of their use being effective and humane.

The distribution of questionnaires to local vet surgeries and pet stores for voluntary pick up, and by approaching owners walking their dogs, to collect data for the Hiby et al (2004) study, may have veiled an even bigger issue in the dog owning community, by focusing on conscientious owners. A study by Kobelt et al (2003) in Australia may have avoided this limitation by randomly

distributing a survey to registered dog owners to investigate how their dogs are housed, exercised, trained, and generally cared for. However, as this survey relied on the returning of a questionnaire, the results may also be bias towards conscientious owners, and indeed the fact that they were registered means they were in a conscientious minority.

Kobelt et al (2003) documented the physical and social conditions provided to dogs in suburban households and attempted to establish a relationship between these conditions and the incidence of problematic behaviours. A focus group, including representatives of the survey targets, and parties with an interest in the outcomes of such an investigation, developed forced choice questions for how the dog was housed, trained and generally cared for, and rating scales for the frequency of problematic behaviours displayed by the dog. Survey results indicated that the majority of households have only one dog, mainly kept for companionship, the latter being consistent with Marston and Bennett's (2003) review. The majority of dogs were kept in the backyard, regardless of the owner being home or out, and were being walked more than once a week. However, approximately a third of the owners surveyed walked their dog once a week or less.

The frequency with which owners walked their dogs was associated with decreased prevalence of excitement problematic behaviours. These behaviours were also less prevalent with increasing time spent with the dog and larger yards for large and miniature-sized dogs only. First-time dog owners were more inclined to report excitement and nervousness in their dogs, and spent the least time with their dogs. The level of obedience of a dog was inversely related to the incidence of problematic behaviours, with larger dogs being more likely to receive obedience training. There was no evidence from this study to support the popular opinion that more than one dog in the household reduces the occurrence of problematic behaviours (Simpson, 1997). However, many of the findings in this study support the theory that social isolation from humans is thought to cause the most anxiety for companion dogs (Tuber et al, 1996).

Conclusion

The ability of dogs to bond with their human owner facilitates the modern companionship demands of owners. The physical and psychological benefits of companion animals are now well documented, but the observation that dogs will preferentially play near or with human rather than apart suggests that the human-canine relationship can be mutually fulfilling (Marston and Bennett, 2003). This is only possible if welfare needs are met, and problematic behaviours indicative of compromised welfare are minimised (Hiby et al, 2004). The research reviewed throughout this discussion compellingly highlights the welfare benefits of environmental enrichment, training and investing time in nurturing the human-canine bond.

References

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