



Canine Ethology

Dogs are not humans and therefore have a very different set of behaviours, adapted to help them survive in their habitat. Before understanding their behaviour we need to understand what they are and where they came from. Our UK qualified Dog (and Cat) Behaviour Advisor has prepared this document to help you understand better.

Dogs evolved from Wolves

When humans were nomads wolves would move in after them to scavenge the garbage they left behind. Once humans started farming only the wolves that could tolerate human presence could continue benefitting from this rich food source which was not fixed. These few therefore became genetically isolated from the rest of the wolf population and nature selected those who were the most sociable, trusting individuals, who could digest starch, looked cute and possibly also stopped developing sooner than wolves.

When is a dog not a wolf?

Always. A dog is a dog. If a dog were a wolf it would be a wolf, not a dog. Principles and studies of wolf behaviour cannot automatically translate to dog behaviour. They are adapted to survive in very different habitats and in a very different social atmosphere so it is harmful to treat them the same way.

Breed differences

Different breeds/types of dogs were selected in the past for certain behaviours that gave the human some sort of advantage. These differences can be observed the best in the predatory behaviours of different breeds. The wild type (wolf) needs the full hunting sequence to survive, which involved finding prey, stalking it, chasing it, grabbing it, and killing it.

Our pets however are different for the most part. Gundogs are predominantly used to retrieve fallen fowl and therefore have a very pronounced grabbing instinct but not all feel compelled to chase, preferring to freeze in stalk-like postures (e.g. pointing, setting). Herding dogs use the stalking posture to control livestock movement and enjoy it immensely. For this reason they will move closer when the livestock moves in order to get back into stalk position and the distance is usually consistent for individual animals.

So if your retriever or spaniel likes to carry your stuff around it is because we bred them to be somewhat addicted to it, and if a your Border Collie has started herding the children or other dogs in the park it is probably because he has gone self-employed doing what we bred him to do.

Toileting

Mother teaches puppy to get off the bed to go to the toilet and this forms a basis on which we can continue to work on. Sadly, puppies raised in substandard environments often do not get this opportunity and are harder to toilet train.

Just like predatory behaviour, there is a predictable sequence that is normally followed, i.e. get up, walk some distance and go to the toilet. Generally, solids are deposited further away from home than liquids to avoid attracting other predators to home.

Begging, nagging and pulling

If your dog barks at the door, or to get your attention or to beg for food it is likely that you or someone trained him to do so. If you respond with something they want, dogs quickly learn to repeat that behaviour to obtain desirable outcomes. If you wait longer to respond with what they are asking for, you're only teaching them that doing it for longer is also going to work for them. The best way to prevent and curb this sort of behaviour is to totally ignore their pleas and be patient while they learn it no longer works. They may throw some tantrums at first so be prepared for intensified behaviour before things get better. The disappointment is usually enough to teach them they shouldn't continue with this habit.

The same applies with pulling on the leash. If you continue walking or walk faster the dog has obtained what he wanted and will learn to continue pulling. If you want to improve this behaviour you can teach your dog to walk at heel or simply stop when he pulls and only walk when the leash has slack. This means you shouldn't hold the leash tight to hold your dog close because that is equivalent to pulling, from Fido's point of view.

Jumping up

This one of very few behaviours that remains very prominent from their ancestor, the wolf. Wolf pups greet their mother by licking her face to get her to regurgitate food. When dogs jump up to greet us they are attempting to do the same. We classify this as social greeting.

Play biting

Dogs only have their mouth and feet to manipulate their environment. It therefore makes sense they would use their mouth a lot when playing. Play biting should not be seen as a problem issue unless the dog is biting way too hard or being overly rough. Ideally puppies should be encouraged to bite so that they can learn how hard it is acceptable to do so before all the fun ends.

Ultimately dogs behave the way they do because we made them so either through selection or by being trained, sometimes unknowingly, to do what they do.