

A Strategy for Dog-Owner Education

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I have read with interest the response by Graham Henderson of the Toronto Humane Society (*Int J Stud Anim Prob* 2(6):305-309, 1981). I agree with many of his statements and am pleased that he, in turn, agreed with most of mine, although at first, this was not entirely apparent. In fact, I found Mr. Henderson's letter to be somewhat confusing, and it contained a number of inaccuracies and contradictions. So, please bear with me if I go into some detail to try to unravel the confusion.

In order to allow a comprehensive assessment of my program of Dog Owner Education, I would like to reemphasize some of its major points. The primary intention is to promote an early license application: preferably *before* the owner acquires a dog, but at least, while the dog is still a pup. The rationale behind this suggestion is that this would provide an ideal opportunity to provide the prospective (or new) dog owner with an information package on health, husbandry, puppy-training, and the *prevention* of behavioral problems (of which aggression is the most common and the most serious).

A secondary aim is to spread the burden of licensing control, such that all people who deal with dogs on a regular and/or professional basis (e.g., veterinarians, breeders, trainers, and members of kennel clubs and humane organizations) share some of the responsibility by making it their primary objective to check that the dog has a valid license tag. If not, the name and address of the owner may be added to a list of similar offenders, which can be turned into the licensing authority once a month or so. I think that this would provide a cheap, easy and effective means of "policing" licenses.

A third point is that the license fees should remain minimal. I do not feel that the license fee in itself should be used as a deterrent against dog ownership. It would be unfair to penalize people who may have insufficient means (e.g., the handicapped, or the elderly). On the other hand, there should be no excuse for not acquiring a license, and accordingly, there should be a swingeing (not "swinging," as previously published) increase in fines. The low cost of the license and the added educational benefits should encourage dog owners to license their pets. In addition, the higher risk that license dodgers will be discovered and reported and the much higher penalties involved would act as a strong deterrent against negligent behavior on behalf of owners.

Henderson believes that Toronto has "an excellent [licensing] system," yet he admits that "it is difficult to collect [the license fee] from more than 50 percent of Toronto's dog owners." This outcome is probably superior to that found in most licensing programs, but it is still a laughably low return. It is hoped that the implementation of even a few of my suggestions will help to improve this situation.

Testing for Owners

A minor point of the educational program was the suggestion that the owner be tested for comprehension of the information package. However, such a test would

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be voluntary, and I made it quite clear that "a low score on the test should not necessarily be used to prevent someone from owning a dog." Instead, the nature of the test would be a further educational exercise, and its primary function to enable "the licensing authority to concentrate its educational efforts on potentially poor pet owners." For instance, if prospective owners did poorly on the test, they could be asked whether they would want their dog to bite them, to eliminate indoors, or to bark all day long — because unless the owner makes a little effort to teach the pup how to behave appropriately, in all probability, when the dog is an adult, it *will* behave in this offensive manner. *Behavioral problems are much easier to prevent than they are to cure.*

Henderson expressed his view that an "education program...will almost certainly antagonize the majority of dog owners," suggesting that such a service is "fanciful," "utopian," and "treacherous." He maintained further that testing the comprehension of the educational material would represent "over-regulation" of dog owners, who would retaliate via an "indignant, bloodthirsty" onslaught. Indeed, Henderson filled many a paragraph explaining why an educational program would not work, but then he went on to explain that a similar program is currently in practice at the Toronto Humane Society (a fact that I lauded in my original article). The Toronto Humane Society implements a questionnaire which, in Mr. Henderson's words, "functions...to screen out those individuals who would make poor owners" and furthermore, affords the "staff the opportunity to inform the adopter of the principles of good pet ownership." Despite these statements, Henderson insisted that the Toronto program remains "educationally neutral" and "contains no proviso for *dog owner education*"(?).

I believe that an educational program would meet with the wholehearted approval of the dog-owning public. I am certain that dog owners would welcome the availability of information revealing: how easy it is to train a 6- to 8-week-old puppy; how simple it is to train dogs to urinate and defecate upon command (such that owners may choose a suitable time and location for their dog's deposits); or how to treat the more common behavioral problems, and in particular, how to *prevent* the development of aggressiveness. Most dog owners would be prepared to seek out such information, if only they knew that it existed.

Timing of Education Is Essential

Henderson suggested that I am "naive to think that any long-term change in owner attitudes will be achieved through a system which calls for a one-time test situation." On the contrary, I think that presenting an information package to dog owners while they have a young pup is a most effective approach to owner education. Mr. Henderson elegantly mixed his metaphors and was otherwise somewhat sarcastic about "the injection of a *serum* of education," as he put it. However, just as we inject young pups to protect them from the more serious canine diseases, I think that we should "inject" the owners with a little timely advice that will hopefully help to prevent the ruination of otherwise good animals. As with distemper vaccine, it is essential that this "educational serum" be administered at the right time. Dog owners must have access to this information at a time when it will be maximally effective, *i.e.*, at a time when they are most likely to make good use of it, since they are still keen and enthusiastic about their young pup and the dog itself is still young and eager to learn. If the material were handed out too early to prospective dog owners, it is likely that much of the information would be forgotten before it

could be put to practical use. Alternatively, if the material were handed out too late, to owners of adult dogs that had already developed a number of bad habits, it is likely that the dog would have become firmly entrenched in its bad ways. By this time, most tired and exasperated owners would lack the patience to implement an effective retraining program. A one-time educational effort will most certainly have beneficial effects, particularly if conducted at the optimal time.

In order to clarify my contention that it is not fair to label all dog owners as "irresponsible," I will take Henderson's own example: he is certainly not irresponsible for failing to comprehend the intricacies of quantum mechanics. On the other hand, if he wished to become a particle physicist, he would be irresponsible if he did not make some attempt to understand his chosen field. However, even a century ago, this would have been an extremely difficult task, since there were no textbooks on the topic and no experts to seek for advice. This is precisely the position of the "average dog owner" today. There is no reliable and convenient source of information on the topic of behavioral problems in dogs. Despite this, some dog owners still go to great lengths to seek advice; yet, for their troubles, they are frequently labeled as "irresponsible owners."

Let us consider the dilemma of an owner whose dog has developed a behavioral problem — who is there to turn to for advice? Regardless of the specific problem, most veterinarians will suggest one of three alternatives: tranquilization, castration (or spaying), or euthanasia. With most canine behavioral problems, neutering and tranquilization are ineffective and, in some cases, they are absolutely contraindicated. Nonetheless, the veterinary profession still adheres to this triad of treatments as a panacea for all behavioral problems, and few veterinarians will take time to consider the problem from a behavioral point of view.

Another popular source of information is the plethora of training books that are currently available. Unfortunately, despite good intentions, in my opinion many of these books are the cause of a great number of behavioral problems. The methods described in most of these books are hopelessly outdated and are relatively inefficient and ineffective. As a result, the training methods prescribed meet with only limited success — many owners lose their patience and eventually disband any hope of training at all. In addition, many training books contain glaring errors and dangerous misadvice, e.g., not to begin training until the dog is 6 months old. This little gem alone is probably the single greatest cause of behavioral problems in dogs.

Other sources of information include the pamphlets produced by several pet food companies and humane societies. However, all too often these merely reiterate the information from veterinarians and dog trainers. In short, dog owners do not have a reliable source of information to help them solve their problems. This is why I think that it is unwise to simply label them as "irresponsible" and then proceed to do little to try to alleviate this colossal and most worrisome problem. Not only should there be a concerted effort to educate dog owners, but programs should be made available to veterinarians, trainers, breeders, and humane society and pet food company personnel as well. It is not just the owner that is "the weak link in the...chain."

The Problem of Euthanasia

I take particular exception to one point mentioned by Henderson. He erroneously implied that I had proposed that "unlicensed dogs be sent with greater dispatch to the euthanasia room" and that "this punishes an innocent party for

another's careless, irresponsible crime." In the first place, I did *not* propose to hasten the process by which unlicensed animals are adopted by the Lord. Instead, I advocated preferential treatment for licensed animals, whereby "unlicensed animals would be kept for a specified time" (e.g., in line with existing practices), after which they would be "euthanized as a public health hazard (no evidence of rabies injections), whereas a licensed dog would be kept for a longer period," and every attempt would be made to locate the owner from the licensing records.

I would say that the current practices have more of an "Orwellian" tinge. Often, in humane societies, the decision of *whether* or *when* to euthanize *which* pets is based on the purely arbitrary and emotional considerations of the particular individuals involved. For instance, the young, the cute, and the healthy are often reprieved. In some instances, an advertising campaign will be waged for a cute, well-behaved, healthy pup, which often stimulates an emotional flood of well-meaning adopters. On the other hand, fewer tears are spared for the unruly, ugly, old, and unhealthy pets, which hastily meet their maker. It is not the dog's fault that it is unruly or unhealthy. Often the owners are to blame for this. And why? Because no one has bothered to tell them how to look after a pet. And as a result of this negligence, the poor misbehaved critter is euthanized. Quite frankly, I am not one to spend time arguing which is the "best" way to euthanize a pet, or which is the correct euphemistic term to describe the procedure. If the pet has "to go," which all too often is an unfortunate inevitability, then it is hoped that it may (in Henderson's words) "go to a more peaceful and dignified death."

However, I am more concerned about attempting to prevent the need for this large-scale slaughter (or euthanasia), which is currently of in excess of 15 million pets each year. I think the major consideration should be: how can we promote "a more peaceful and dignified life" for these animals. I think that, in part, this might be accomplished by helping owners to understand how they can avoid "screwing up" their pets. For, compared with dogs that are well behaved, those that develop behavioral problems are much more likely to be abandoned, given away, put up for adoption and/or eventually euthanized. To try and prevent this, people who work with animals should consider it their humane duty to make an active effort to educate dog owners, rather than expecting them to educate themselves.

Henderson raised an important point in that I did little better myself "than to commit a nominal fallacy in *labeling* the problem one of inadequate education," yet did "virtually nothing to indicate what the content of [my] scheme of education would be." *Mea culpa, lapsus calami*. I have spent the past few months compiling a suitable educational package. This is not yet completed and so, for the meantime, I will merely outline its contents. The information booklet will consist of two parts. One part concerns the prevention of behavioral problems, with particular reference to anti-aggressiveness exercises and housetraining methods. Owners must realize that every puppy, no matter what breed, is a potential biter, and as such, owners should make an active attempt to prevent these aggressive tendencies from developing. Otherwise, if left to its own devices, the dog will grow up to behave like a dog and the owner should not be too surprised if the dog habitually growls and snarls and bites. The second part of the booklet describes a new psychological training program, which has been specially designed for puppies (although it is also effective with adult dogs). With use of these techniques, pups of 4 to 5 months of age will already have mastered most of the basic obedience commands ("come here," "heel," "sit," "lie down," "stay," "kennel," "be quiet," etc.). Anyone interested in a

copy of this booklet may shortly obtain it from me at the address given above. The pamphlet will be free and not copyrighted, so that it may be reproduced and distributed by interested parties. This puppy training program has been developed in conjunction with the Education Department of the Marin Humane Society in California.