

PAWS for Action – From a Dog’s Perspective
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Have you ever wondered what our world looks like from your dog’s perspective? They experience life primarily through their senses of smell and hearing. They can’t tell us if they don’t like something we are doing to them, nor can they understand our explanations for why we brought them to the vet to be poked and prodded. We weigh more than, and tower above, most dogs. Yet, over time we develop deeply satisfying relationships if we can be somewhat predictable in our actions, consistent in our communications, and if we return even a fraction of the love and devotion they give us.

Then they have our children to contend with who, at various ages, can be highly erratic and unwittingly abusive in their behavior toward dogs. Much to my dismay, my mom had little sympathy for me whenever I got on the wrong side of a dog. From the time I was a toddler she began to teach me how to properly approach a dog. If I failed to employ basic good manners in my interactions with Topper, our Boston terrier, it was my fault if he found it necessary to resort to using his mouth to get my attention and make me stop acting like an idiot. Topper didn’t need to draw blood to get his point across, and so he didn’t. His toothy pinch was enough to teach me a lesson. My mom understood that this was Topper’s only means of letting me know that it was time to stop whatever mischief I was trying with him.

The number of dogs living in American households increased substantially in the 1950s. Not surprising, this resulted in an increase in dog bites, prompting public health officials to take notice. The first comprehensive epidemiological analysis performed in 1958 revealed several significant trends among dog bites.

Chief among these findings was that children, usually boys between the ages of 5 and 9, were by far the most common victims of dog bites. Because of their height, most injuries occurred around the face, head and neck. When adults were bitten the target was arms, hands and legs. The majority of injuries occurred during high levels of activity such as running, bike riding and rough play.

The benefit of a study like this is that it gives us real information we can use to prevent bites. It is human nature to want to identify “the problem” as being outside of ourselves. For instance, more than 800 cities have enacted breed bans as a means to reduce dog bites. Not only has this particular response proven ineffective, but in many of these cities dog bites have actually increased.

Another way to approach the problem is to educate the public about the true causes of dog bites. We can increase empathy among owners as to what the world looks like from their dog’s perspective and teach them to watch for behavioral cues and respond accordingly. If our household includes a dog, we have a responsibility to give him a framework for living peacefully in our world. Working with a professional dog trainer is not to be underestimated and good training is as much about training owners as their dogs. It is up to us to provide our dogs with a certain amount of routine and predictability in lifestyle and human interaction. And no matter how good your family dog is, kids should always be supervised around animals of any kind.

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