

THE ABUSE EXCUSE and WHY IT'S BAD FOR DOGS

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We are a nation of animal lovers. Raised on “Bambi” and “Black Beauty”, we grow up believing in the inherent innocence and good nature of all creatures, and in the notion that if left to their own devices, all animals would exist in a sort of modern Peaceable Kingdom. When someone adopts a dog from a shelter or rescue agency, there is an assumption that the dog is there solely because of some heartless negligence or outright violence. While this can be the case in all too many situations, a more honest look at the facts will show that most pets are given up to shelters by people who are not all that different than the people who wish to adopt or who work at the agency in question. Job relocation, divorce, a death in the family, loss of income, medical problems, and the threat of insurance cancellation for the owners of some breeds are the most common practical reasons people give up their dogs. While we are all familiar with the staggering number who are turned in for real or imagined behavior problems, even that diagnosis doesn't necessarily jibe with the invocation of abuse that usually accompanies it. If anything, the more common behavior problems associated with most surrendered dogs are symptomatic of an indulgent or at worst, benignly neglectful home where no one took time to address the issues before they got out of hand.

However, the cases of outright abuse against any animal are heinous enough to make the evening news, and will almost always find their way into the public eye. As animal lovers, we are horrified to hear about what a few truly brutal humans enact upon an animal unfortunate enough to cross their path. We feel a genuine surge of compassion for the beaten dog, the deliberately starved horse, and the litter of kittens saved from drowning, and we want to distance ourselves from the type of person who could commit such an act. It is proof of our empathy when such a story gets public attention in the media, and hundreds of outraged citizens line up to adopt the victim. But it is also proof of our relative shallowness that the victim's less notorious kennelmates at the shelter go unnoticed and unadopted, perhaps for lack of such a tragic backstory. It may be cynical to say that many of the people who devote so much of their energy and emotion to shelter and rescue work feel best when they feel bad, but as someone who works full time in the shelter industry, I don't think it's untrue.

Based on the horrific nature of the abuse cases which actually make the news and on the institutional support of their prevalence among some of the major fundraising humane organizations and animal rights groups, it only follows that an animal lover interprets any defensive, aggressive or predatory behavior on the part of his dog as being evidence of some sort of abuse.

Abuse vs. neglect; and the effects of each on rehabilitation

First, what is the difference between “neglect” and “abuse”?

On a very basic level, we define neglect as passive and usually a result of ignorance rather than malice, and abuse as active and intentional. Neglect is a dog who is raised outside, tied to a tree, hardly fed or attended to. Abuse is a dog who is struck, kicked or otherwise used as an object of physical violence. Neglect is embodied in the dog of an animal collector: living in a cage, parasite-laden, ignored except as a possession; a notch on the belt of a sick person who, ironically, usually thinks he is saving the dog from a worse fate. The local sociopath who was prosecuted for the hoarding of over one hundred Shar Pei but who called himself a “rescuer” who “didn’t believe in giving up on a dog” is an extreme, but telling, example. Abuse is embodied in the dog of a violent human (who, according to sociologists, is also much more likely to abuse human members of the family): physically threatened and beaten, with the attacks usually culminating in an extremely sadistic event which causes the animal to finally die or be abandoned in critical condition and/or the abuser to be reported. A female Dobe in our system who had been corrected with a baseball bat to the jaw for barking is one of our more grotesque in-house models of true abuse. Neither condition paints a pretty picture. Neither is better than the other. But they are different, and I find they have different effects on the unfortunate animals subjected to them. There is a third condition which merits more attention than either neglect or abuse in its devastating effect on a dog. I’ll save that for last.

How does the abused dog differ from the neglected dog when it comes to behavioral rehabilitation? To explain to new volunteers and employees at our facility, I use the following anthropomorphic analogy. Obviously, because of self-awareness, the concept of morality and the ability to question another’s motives (among so many other things that contribute to what we think of as human consciousness), a human psyche can be much more permanently scarred by the type of mistreatment we’re discussing. With that in mind, please accept this analogy as a parable rather than a literal comparison. Three young adolescent kids are put into a progressive reform school. One has been smacked around and verbally abused since he could answer back. One was the middle child of a huge family, and it was hardly ever noticed if he was around or not. One was the spoiled only son and heir of an indulgent parent. How do you think each of them will do?

The abused kid will have a hard time for awhile. He is so used to ducking his head and cringing that it’s an automatic response. His teachers and leaders are tough, but unlike anyone else in his previous life, they’re fair. At first, their demands on him seem too challenging, and he assumes that he will always be punished for whatever effort he puts forth. But as time passes he realizes that what they’re asking him to do isn’t that hard. More importantly, it’s actually something concrete and doable. Pretty soon he starts hearing how smart he is, and how far he’ll go. Maybe he’ll never forget what happened to him in the past. But he’s better equipped to deal with the future thanks to the trust he’s learned.

The neglected kid figures he’s just another number. He’s not used to it when he gets called on, and he’s nervous. Sometimes he stammers. He’s afraid to get things wrong, but he’s almost afraid to get things right, because he doesn’t know how to deal with the attention. Sometimes he’s the opposite: he’s too overbearing and exuberant in social

situations because he's really never learned how to deal with others. Sometimes he goes from one extreme to the other...school is pretty overwhelming. With time he finds a middle ground, and eventually he begins to set himself apart as an individual. He still has the security of a big group, but he also knows his name and his place in that group, and he's happy with it. He's prepared for the world.

The spoiled kid has a problem. Who do all these peasants think they're talking to? Don't they know who he IS? When pouting and sulking don't make things grind to a halt like they did at home with Mummy, he throws tantrums. Sometimes he hurts people when he throws tantrums. No matter what his teachers do, they can't convince him that he is part of a team. They can never tell what will offend him and how he'll express that offense. He is finally expelled. And, the administrators and teachers say, it's a shame, because sometimes he could be such a sweet kid. But he doesn't have what it takes to succeed in real life.

But why does it matter if we assume the worst about a dog's past?

When one works on the front lines of rescue and animal care, one sees some real toe-curling horrors enacted by genuinely stupid or evil humans upon their dogs. Any abuse is too much. But we owe it to the dogs who rely on us to improve their lives to recognize the limits that abuse has on their minds and behavior. I firmly believe that any behavior or reaction a person puts into a dog is something a knowledgeable and determined person can remove. Dogs are far more resilient than the people who care for them. In my practice I have worked with dogs who have been struck with shovels, who have had cigarettes put out on them, who have been repeatedly booted and beaten, according to actual documentation, and in all too few cases, with prosecution of the offending humans. Regaining their trust is nowhere near as difficult as it was for their abusers to lose it. We all marvel at a beaten dog's tendency to adore its abuser, yet we can't imagine that very same dog acting normally ever again once it's in a normal home. To blame defensive or aggressive behavior solely on an abusive past can end up hurting the dog even more.

How?

First, writing off a dog's inappropriate behavior as a by-product of abuse cancels out the diagnosis of other potential reasons: health problems, ineffective training, bad genetics are just a few of the possibilities. I have had clients in the past whose dogs suffered from epilepsy, half-blindness, and severe hypothyroidism to name a few examples but who went undiagnosed for months: the owners were advised by other trusted canine professionals that their respective dogs were spooky and defensive because they had been "abused". They were assured by well-meaning animal lovers that all their dogs needed was "love" and "understanding", when what they truly needed was veterinary attention.

More commonly, the "abuse excuse" also prevents people from training and controlling their dogs. Convinced that their dog has suffered enough hardship, they decide to "make up" to the dog for his past torment at the hands of lesser humans. This is poisonous, as

the overindulgence of a dog is the main reason he fails in a home. When he arrives with an either real or supposed diagnosis of abusive treatment, the more compassionate nature of his caregivers is to spoil him. When he responds to the lack of leadership and structure by becoming possessive or defensive, his “abused” status is invoked and a few more privileges are added in the hopes that he might be placated into pethood. Suggestions to take away these freebies and to insist on serious compliance with obedience commands are met with accusations of “cruelty” and lack of empathy. In too many cases, this dog is literally spoiled to death: his nasty, defensive behavior finally results in an injury to a human family member, he is turned in to a shelter or brought to the vet for euthanasia with the reassurance that they “tried everything” and that the dog is hopelessly unable to overcome his horrible past and is better off at rest.

Although their history may not be as colorfully violent as the abused dog, the dogs who have been either benignly or intentionally neglected are sometimes tougher to help. Often, they only view a human being as the bearer of a food dish and the occasional giver of a pat on the head. When they are exposed to humans who actually want to interact with them, to touch them and speak with them and be close, they are sometimes overwhelmed with confusion, and can give off a number of mixed messages. This is the trait that gets them labeled as unpredictable. In almost every abuse case I’ve dealt with, the dog is often a pet who has lived in the house and who suffered his fate due to some transgression of house rules he was never taught in the first place. The neglected dog is more often a stranger to normal human contact, good or bad. His rehabilitation tends to take longer than the dog who has been actively, and usually by human standards, much more abusively treated.

The seriously abused dogs I’ve worked with were always a challenge. The neglected ones required the patience of a saint. But the very worst Dobermans I’ve ever dealt with in rescue have been the ones that came from super-indulgent homes where the dog was allowed to rule like a privileged princeling; treated as a human child; and otherwise given full charge of the house, its contents and occupants. Unlike their neglected or abused cousins, these dogs frequently have bitten people in their own family, and usually more than once. To see them surrendered to the shelter with an honor guard of teddy bears, a soft bed, special treats and a long list of requests is particularly heartbreaking, as these are often the dogs that we are least likely to be able to help. Rather than experiencing a specific, violent set of horrible behaviors enacted on them by a human, or the desolate vacuum of total neglect, these dogs have been insidiously and actively “lied to” for their entire lives. If their innate temperament is particularly defensive or aggressive, convincing them that they must respectfully defer to kind human leadership is sometimes impossible. They have been conditioned in such a way that they have an entirely upside-down view of the world which is often unchangeable in a shelter setting and which therefore makes them unadoptable. Compared to the neglect or abuse cases, “removing” the damage done by their well-meaning past owners is a much slower moving process with many more risks to the people charged with doing the rehab, two conditions which get them placed in the highest risk category of training/rehab subjects. Dig deep enough in the history of one of these tragic cases, and you are likely to find that there was no actual training or structure in the dog’s life, or if there was it was abandoned

as being “too mean” or because “he didn’t like it”. The owners of these dogs are the ones most likely to call the shelter frequently, demanding a detailed update on the welfare of their ex-dog. They wish to know how he's eating, how many times a day does he get run in the yard, have we found a family "just as loving as theirs" except one without kids, other dogs, old people, men with beards, cats, etc etc. When it is my sad duty to inform this type of owner that his dog is beyond my help, it is why I will answer his angry protests by telling him that he has abused his dog in a much more damaging way than if he had put his boot in its side.

The number of dogs surrendered to our agency with a documented abuse is slight. I have only seen about five actual abuse cases in the past six years, out of the hundreds who have passed through DRU's system. Severely neglected dogs often come in as singles or groups from Animal Control cases; picture emaciated, wormy, physically compromised animals with no normal human contact and you will understand what I mean by genuine neglect. Sadly, we see a comparatively high number of those, compared to the abuse cases. But the number of dogs surrendered with an over-indulged history (ie, no training, no crating, total and unearned freedom in the house, free choice feeding, furniture and bed access, etc) is far higher. Of the dogs with known backgrounds euthanized for serious and irreversible behavior issues in our records, almost all come from the indulged profile. None have a documented or even circumstantially estimated abuse history.

The other side of the coin: abuse as an excuse against adoption.

In the first year that I officially worked for DRU, I had an experience that I’ll never tire of describing. A young couple had come to look at dogs. The man had done a “lot of research” and considered himself quite dog savvy. I stood with them in one of the large outdoor pens, where a candidate for adoption was trotting around. We were having a friendly conversation, occasionally punctuated by the nudge of the Doberman’s nose, when suddenly the man stomped his foot violently in the direction of the dog, raising his arm above his head. the dog startled and decided to confine his explorations to the far side of the pen.

“Well, that one’s out”, said the young man to his lady friend, “He’s obviously been abused.”

I asked the fellow what exactly that was that he had done. I had entertained the possibilities of some sort of Tourette’s or a bad reaction to his cold medicine. But he informed me that he had been reading about “temperament testing” in one of the many dog books he was using, and that this “test” was engineered to diagnose past abuse, with the understanding that an abused dog is not going to be a good pet. He described pretty much all of the beliefs held by the “Everything Has Been Abused” contingent and informed me that the only reason a Dobe would “turn on you” was because he had been abused. I let him go on for a few minutes, and during a pause in the conversation I jumped toward him, raising my arm. He shrank back, obviously surprised.

“You may want to look at a different guy,” I told his girlfriend, “This one has obviously been abused.”

While he wasn't happy about it, it made the point nicely. Strangers coming into a kennel to look at dogs (especially adult dogs of a breed which is perhaps a little suspicious of strangers) should NEVER take it upon themselves to raise their hands, shout, stomp or any of the other foolishness I have seen done in the name of “checking for signs of abuse”. The most violently abused dog I've trained (Roxie, who took a steel shovel to the back of the head) wouldn't blink if you swung a golf club at her. And some of the most lovingly treated dogs I've worked with hit the deck when you clear your throat. My ex-husband's admittedly spoiled Dobe, Ludwig, had lived with us since his conception: I caught him in my own hands as he was born. In many ways he lived a softer life than “my” dogs (although that life was still filled with fair limitations and training). Luddy never felt a human hand in anything other than an expression of affection. But if one quickly raised one's hand to hang up the car keys or reach down a can of soup from the top shelf, he would cringe a little bit. He would fail this “abuse test” instantly. To think that a sweet but perhaps genetically “soft” dog much like Luddy might lose the chance at a great home because he had a fairly normal reaction to a sudden, unpredictable movement on the part of some well-meaning but totally misguided person is hard to believe. But based on how many times I've seen people do some type of extemporaneous “temperament testing” based on what they've read or heard from an erstwhile “expert”, I'm sure it happens at shelters all the time.

Some adopters tell us point blank that they don't want an abused dog. They assume that because we are a rescue, that most of our dogs are abuse cases. They further assume that if they take a dog which has been abused, there will be a huge problem. Sometimes, it feels like we are trying to “deprogram” this adopter from a cultish belief system as we try to convince him that even the most brutishly treated dog will be very pleased to move on and succeed if guided with compassion and balance. It's our job as responsible dog people to use our heads and not just our hearts, and to remember that there is both more and less to the abuse factor than meets the eye.

A rescued or shelter dog is more than his past experiences. He is a marvelous individual combination of genes, personality traits, nerve, humor and most of all, potential. Those who see him as a victim make him one. Ironically, that in itself is a serious form of psychological abuse: limiting a dog's ultimate potential in order to feel like we are “protecting” him from a past he would easily forget, if we would only let go of our heart's ego and allow him to do so.

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