

LOVING DOGS TO DEATH

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I was fortunate to grow up in an era where stress and crime were minimal, no cellphones, computers, social media or TV available and children could safely walk and play, in the streets. Dogs were pets, not babies or children, and were treated as dogs, living happily outside. We were allowed more freedom to learn social and coping skills, independence and how to suffer consequences of our actions, mostly through trial and error, with rules, boundaries and limitations being naturally applied, and followed – very much how it is in the animal world. Life, today has become so complicated, stressful and unsafe that, understandably, parents and dog owners have become wary, more cautious, and over protective of their charges. Humans have become more emotional than rational. Dogs are being swamped with affection, but deprived of rules, boundaries and limitations. Although they long to please, they have no idea what is expected of them because there are no clearly defined guidelines, resulting in insecurity and lack of coping skills.

In the dog world, puppies are not cute and must know their place. Their playful behavior around normal, adult dogs is tolerated, commonly known as “Puppy license.” This license expires around the age of 16 to 18 weeks, in relation to hormonal changes. Acceptable behavior today, such as taking away a bone, nipping an adult’s tail or walking over an adult’s body, can quickly become unacceptable tomorrow. This is when the adult dogs teach puppies the critical social skills of self-control and respecting boundaries. Unfortunately, at this age, the puppies are with their human owners, that still consider them to be so cute, failing to teach them these vital, social skills and, in some cases, prevent their older dogs from doing so, by punishing them because they are “bullying the puppy.” Puppies expect to be led and guided and from the young age of 7 weeks, will watch their human owners to see what the rules are. If these are lacking, or are inconsistent, they will feel the need to take charge as they mature. Depending on the breed, or an individual dog, lack of consistent, calm assertive application of boundaries and rules can lead to unacceptable behavior, ranging from out of control, abusive “Spoilt brats” to serious insecure and fearful aggression, often resulting in euthanasia – loving your dogs to death !

What I term “killing with kindness” cases, are becoming more frequent, where owners are overloading their dogs with affection, whether earned or not, for acceptable or unacceptable behavior, to the point where the dogs become so stressed and anxious, practically living a nightmare 24/7. Owners and innocent people are being attacked and mauled, in some cases, repeatedly, by insecure, fearful dogs. Some dog owners are running the risk of being evicted from complexes or estates, due to dogs suffering from separation anxiety, whining and barking incessantly, or attacking people. Surprisingly, when these dogs are removed from their owners, the transformation from extreme anxiety to calm and relaxed, is instant, they literally give a huge sigh and collapse in a relieved heap. Shelter dogs, with baggage and behavior issues, adopted by these “dog lovers”, are so overwhelmed with affection and attention, making up for, what owners believe, the love and affection the dog lacked in the past. More so than

most, these are the dogs that need to be left alone, given space and time to adjust. With calm and careful coaxing, the dog must be allowed to approach the owners, not the other way around. If the opposite occurs, where the dog is needy and follows the owner everywhere (“Velcro dogs”), the dog must be quietly taught to go to his bed or mat, in the same area or room you are in, where he shares your space from a distance, but is not on top of you, learning confidence and independence, avoiding the dreaded separation anxiety so many dogs suffer from, these days. Working dogs, in pet homes, are another group affected by too much love and insufficient draining of the accumulated, mental and physical energy. These dogs need exercise and jobs to perform, otherwise they turn to the only way available to them, of releasing the pent up boredom and frustration, resulting in unacceptable behavior, such as barking, whining, jumping up, digging, biting, escaping and destructive behavior.

Humans have a need to touch, kiss and cuddle which dogs fulfill, and also enjoy as they are affectionate, but their other needs are overlooked. Affection not earned and given at the wrong time, can be detrimental to the dog. Love your dogs as much as you want, provided you are rewarding the appropriate stable, calm and obedient behavior and not the inappropriate unstable, fearful, anxious and aggressive behavior.

I am asked, on occasion, whether I love my dogs, as they don’t see me hugging and kissing them all the time. My reply is always the same –“ I love and respect them so much that I put their needs above mine.”