

## Dog Training Solutions

### Why does my dog do that?

*By D. Caroline Coile, Ph.D.*

Don't bark. Don't dig. Don't chew. Don't be a dog. Be a child in a fur suit. A perfectly mannered child who plays on cue, sleeps on cue and is seen but not heard. But dogs aren't children in fur suits. Dogs bark, dig, chew — and more. It's the nature of the beast.

#### Dogs Bark

And sometimes, bark and bark and bark. Barking can be traced to the dog's wolf ancestry — sort of. Adult wolves seldom bark, but juvenile wolves bark as an alarm signal when intruders enter the den territory. One popular theory of dog domestication speculates that domestic dogs are neotenized wolves, meaning dogs are like wolves in various stages of arrested development. Like young wolves, adult dogs remain comparatively trustful, playful, dependent, obedient — and barky. All these traits made them more readily integrated into human society.

Barking in response to intruders was an especially valuable trait, a trait that is still valued in many dogs today. The problem is that many of us no longer live in villages and camps, but in suburbia and apartments. And many of our dogs consider a blowing leaf as worthy of alarm as a masked burglar.

Barking occurs for reasons other than alarm. Barking and howling serve as auditory beacons, alerting the rest of the pack to the barker's location and drawing them all together. This may be one reason solitary dogs tend to bark and howl.

Dogs also bark in excitement, sometimes when hunting or chasing game or even a ball. This is more difficult to explain in terms of ancient hunting behavior, but barking is an asset when working for humans as hunters or herders. Barking informs the human hunter of the dog and prey's whereabouts, or pushes the flock or herd away from the herding dog. Barking itself may thus add some excitement to an otherwise bored dog's monotony, becoming self-rewarding and explaining the dog's propensity to bark at air.

#### Dogs Dig

Wild canids, such as wolves, dig for a number of reasons. They excavate dens in which to raise young. They bury food for later consumption. They dig out prey. Northern dogs dig to escape the cold and southern dogs dig to escape the heat. All dogs dig to escape confinement. Digging is a natural and adaptive behavior.

Young wolves practice digging as part of their play repertoire, and because domestic dogs retain so many behaviors of young wolves, they include digging as part of their day's entertainment. The problem arises when our dogs, especially those confined to our pristine yards, turn digging into a fine art.

#### Dogs Chew

Toddlers explore with their hands and mouths. So do puppies. Humans are more oriented toward exploring and manipulating with their hands, whereas dogs are more talented with their mouths. Those exploratory talents include carrying, licking, grabbing, biting and gnawing.

These are skills an adult dog will need, and so they are the skills a young dog needs to perfect. Unfortunately, young dogs perfect their skills on your new shoes, antique furniture and feather pillows.

#### Dogs Steal

Do you really think your dog has some sort of moral code it feels compelled to live up to? No, dogs have a survival code

that starts with: "Fill thy belly." The first time they nonchalantly pick a slice of meat off your counter they have no idea you have some far-fetched rule about them not helping themselves. After all, another part of the code clearly states: "Dog helps those who help themselves."

So they humor your little power trip and wait until you leave the room before helping themselves. And no amount of lecturing about morals and ethics is going to make your dog feel guilty about that whole roast in its stomach.

#### Dogs Scavenge

The dog's very first service to mankind was likely that of garbage man, disposing of wastes that would otherwise attract less-desirable scavengers. And human's first service to dogs was to inadvertently feed them their wastes in village dumpsites.

How thoughtful of you to provide a miniature dumpsite right in the kitchen or outside the backdoor. How bizarre you must seem to oppose your dog's foraging in it — the very basis of the human-dog relationship. It was only trying to be a dog.

#### Dogs Freak

Or at least, get very upset when left alone. Dogs evolved from wolves, which are mostly pack animals. Although there are lone wolves, the typical dog, especially a young dog, can be thought of as a juvenile wolf, and juvenile wolves stay with the pack.

To be left alone is to be put in danger, and a resourceful young wolf would do everything it could to reunite with the pack, including digging, escaping, barking and howling — or as we call it, basically freaking. The behaviorists call it separation anxiety.

#### Dogs Lick

Many people consider it endearing that their dog gives them kisses. Others consider it disgusting. After all, we know what else they've been licking. Some dogs can be fawningly obnoxious, and licking can become annoying.

Licking is a natural dog behavior, but its origin may not be as romantic as you might like. Puppies lick one another as an appeasement gesture, often along with rolling over and giving the canine equivalent of "Uncle!" But puppies mostly use licking to elicit regurgitation from adults, particularly from their dam, around the time of weaning. Wild canids greet adults returning from hunting by licking at the adults' mouths in hopes of getting a meal.

Domestic dogs continue this behavior into adulthood, licking at the mouths of dominant dogs and of humans. When your dog licks at your face when you return home it's not so much giving you sugar, but acknowledging your leadership — and perhaps, asking for a free meal!