

Why Dogs Do What They Do

Get to know your dog better by understanding his natural behavior traits.

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I spoke at an international dog trainers conference a couple of years ago, and it featured an indoor, fenced area where dogs could romp and play. While having lunch, I watched my dog, Tuggy, play with the other canines. A particularly pushy Belgian Malinois (pronounced Mal-ehn-wa) took exception to Tuggy and exploded into a threatening attack. In a convention center filled with dog trainers, it was only seconds before the fight was broken up with no harm to either dog. A man sitting next to me asked: "Why did that dog attack Tuggy?" My simple yet accurate answer was: "Because he's a dog."

It amazes me that after thousands of years' experience with dogs, we humans seem to be baffled by their behavior. When a dog bites a running, screaming child, we want a detailed explanation. If a dog guards its food, we are puzzled by its behavior. When a dog digs a crater in the flower bed, we act as if we never heard of such a thing. As my small effort to alleviate this universal blind spot, here are a few hints about what dogs do.

What we usually refer to as their nature is really a description of what is typical or normal. Dogs have no nature because they are not natural creatures. We created them over several millennia through a process of unnatural selection. For instance, wolves breed once a year, but almost all dogs breed twice a year. We changed the natural timetable of wolf reproduction by breeding animals that came into season more often. That allowed us to breed dogs more frequently, so we could change their genetic makeup more quickly.

This breeding issue brings up the second major point of understanding what dogs do. The second rule of dog behavior is that there are exceptions to every rule. In the case of our only breeding twice yearly rule, you can easily offer Basenjis as an exception. Basenjis, a breed from central Africa, follow the old wolf schedule of mating only once a year.

For most dogs, barking is normal behavior. They bark when frustrated, happy, bored, threatened and asleep. A study of barking demonstrated a humorous canine cliché.

Q: What do you call a Cocker Spaniel that barks 900 times in 10 minutes?

A: Normal.