

A Strategy for Dog-Owner Education

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By conservative estimates, the humane societies and societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals in the United States euthanize over 15 million pets each year. It is a great shame that people who have devoted their lives to animals should be forced to destroy the majority of animals that pass through their hands. In addition, the Pet Food Institute's 1975 Survey revealed that a high percentage of pet owners were unsatisfied with their animals and ended up giving them away, taking them to animal shelters, or losing them in accidents. It would appear that only a minority of pets enjoys the luxury of spending their sunset years with their owners. Moreover, the great majority of former pet owners would not consider acquiring another pet. In contrast to the past, when owning a dog served some utilitarian or recreational purpose, or was simply an enjoyable endeavor, it seems that most pets today achieve only object status. Despite the fact that dogs and humans have enjoyed a close association for several thousand years, the majority of dog owners are relatively unaware of what their dogs are doing, or perhaps more to the point, what they are doing to their dogs. What is more ironic is that many of these problems could easily be avoided.

Many people and organizations tend to blame the dog problem on irresponsible ownership. This, I think, is a nominal fallacy: Labeling a problem is a poor alternative to attempting to understand and perhaps alleviate it. I doubt that the majority of dog owners are intentionally irresponsible, but rather that they are inadequately educated. The 'average dog owner' really only wants to know how to teach the dog basic obedience with the shortest expenditure of time and energy and how to deal with the more common behavioral problems such as aggression, house destruction, barking, roaming and chasing and the occasional neurosis. However, very few of the books available to the dog-owning public supply this information. It is interesting that although there has been considerable research in the area of animal learning within the last century, few of these findings have been put to practical use in the obviously applicable field of dog training. (Ironically, however, many findings from animal experimentation have been overextrapolated to the realm of human psychology.) Instead, the majority of dog-training books describe methods that were devised at about the time of the Great War. It is true that a good trainer can do wonders with a mediocre method, but most dog owners are not professional trainers. Instead they are plumbers, car mechanics, brain surgeons, legal secretaries, parents, etc., and as such they need to be taught the easiest, quickest and most effective way to train a dog.

In order for any program of dog-owner education to be practically acceptable, it is important to keep legislative changes to a minimum. I would propose only one major change: that dog owners be required to apply for a license *before* obtaining a dog. At the time of application the prospective owner could be supplied with an information package containing advice on dog behavior, training and husbandry. In this fashion, the owner would receive relevant information at a time when it would be most beneficial. The first few months of a puppy's life are crucial. This is the time when experiences are new and exert a maximal effect on shaping the dog's personality. All too often, owners discover this fact when it is much too late. For example, some dog-training books instruct owners not to begin training until the dog is 4-6 months old... utter nonsense! At the latest, training should commence as soon as the puppy comes into the home. Owners should also be instructed on how to prevent the development of overly aggressive and/or destructive tendencies. The mandatory early license application would, it is hoped, help to reduce impulse buying and the giving of puppies as unsolicited pets. In addition, the foreknowledge of what to expect from a dog and how to prevent or correct annoying behavior problems would help to make the dog-human relationship more enjoyable for both parties.

I would not advocate raising the license fee substantially in the U.S., but it is essential that there be better licensing controls. Licensing could be easily and effectively controlled by a) making it illegal to sell or give a dog to anyone who has not already applied for a license; b) encouraging people who regularly come into contact with dogs (e.g., veterinarians, trainers, groomers, animal control officers) to report those that are unlicensed; and c) imposing an escalating scale of fines for license dodgers and dog owners who regularly fail to adhere to other local ordinances.

Such a program would require the cooperation of a number of large organizations. It would be nice to see the humane societies and SPCAs lose their present major role as extermination facilities and instead be allowed to administer the licensing program along with animal control agencies and to concentrate on education. At the time of license application, the prospective owner would be given a registration card, which would later be signed by a veterinarian when the pups receive their shots. (Subsequent mandatory, periodic injections would also be recorded on the card.) When the full quota of puppy shots has been administered and before the dog is no more than four months of age, the owner may obtain the dog license tag. The collar tag could be color-coded to facilitate the identification of expired licenses. Thereafter, the license could be renewed every two or three years so as to ease the administrative burden. The time of issuance of the initial license tag would be an ideal opportunity to test the owner's comprehension of the information package. This could be in the form of a series of multiple choice questions much like the written test for obtaining a driver's license. Although a low score on the test should not necessarily be used to prevent someone from owning a dog, the test would allow the licensing authority to concentrate its educational efforts on potentially poor pet owners. (However, in Toronto, I believe that people are not allowed to adopt a pet if they fail to qualify as responsible pet owners after completing a questionnaire.)

The aims of the animal control agencies (sometimes acting with the humane societies and SPCAs) would be first, to selectively remove unlicensed dogs, and second, to control the licensed population. The latter task should emphasize a

quality care and educational program and preferential treatment for licensed dogs. For example, owners of lost or impounded dogs would be notified immediately if the dog is properly tagged. An unlicensed animal would be kept for a specified time, and if not claimed, euthanized as a public health hazard (no evidence of rabies injections), whereas a licensed dog would be kept for a longer period. There should be a sliding scale of fines, with the highest fines for unlicensed animals, or for allowing aggressive dogs or estrous females to run freely. On the other hand, if an owner fails to adhere to local ordinances, e.g., by letting the dog go unleashed, the fine could be minimal (perhaps only a warning), provided the owner is present and the dog is under control, or the dog is close to home and otherwise well-behaved.

Of course the question remains: Where is the money going to come from? I believe that with a potential two- or threefold increase in license revenue and with a swinging increase in fines, the licensing program may well turn out to be self-supporting. However, money will definitely be needed to get the program off the ground and to finance the information package. I feel that the Pet Food Institute, or individual pet food companies, would be ideally suited for this privilege. This is not because I believe the pet food industry should feel responsible because they realize millions of dollar profit from the dog-owning public. (I think it is mainly the responsibility of pet owners if they see fit to spend that much money on pet foods each year.) Instead, I feel that financing the program would be in the best interests of the pet food industry. It would most certainly bring them some good press, and the opportunity to publish an accurate information booklet that would reach every dog owner is an ideal advertising platform for their products.
