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A Butterfly Effect: Consent, Empathy, and the Power of Dog Training

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Consent:

“Consent is not the absence of a no; it is the presence of a yes... Consent is active, not passive... Consent is always necessary, and its absence is inexcusable.” Erin Roidan

Empathy:

“Empathy is about standing in someone else’s shoes, feeling with his or her heart, seeing with his or her eyes.” Daniel H. Pink

Introduction:

As dog professionals, we find it easy to narrow our focus on the dogs. The dogs are certainly a huge part of why we do what we do, so naturally, we sometimes think our work is most important because of its impact on our canine friends. The work we do, however, can have vast and deep implications for animals and humans alike. When we step back we might realize that many common training protocols are, at their core, vehicles for teaching and practicing fundamental human skills like empathy and consent-seeking.

Invited Interaction (AKA Pat, Pet, Pause, Guided Touch, Polite Greeting Skills, etc.) is one such tool that many of us teach, in one form or another, on a regular basis. While teaching a client the how’s and why’s of inviting interactions with dogs may only take a few moments, the ramifications of learning and practicing this simple skill have the potential for making huge ripples in the lives of those we serve.

The story below highlights the powerful possibilities of recognizing that our work as dog professionals is also work as empathy trainers, consent consultants, and perhaps even world changers.

The Story:

Imagine a young adult named Taylor, newly graduated from school and settled into a first real job. Taylor gets a puppy as a way of celebrating the transition to adulthood and happens to meet you at a park. You have only 10 minutes of informal chatting to teach something to this first-time dog owner, and you decide to show Taylor how to use Invited Interactions to gain and maintain consent. You slip in a few details about reading dog body language and warn Taylor that sometimes the puppy will decline an invitation or want to end an interaction. You stress that Taylor always respect when the dog says no, even if that can be difficult at times. You then point out how much more confident Taylor can be that an accepted invitation is truly enjoyable for the dog. Considering the dog’s perspective is woven into every element of your conversation.

First impact:

Taylor initially got a puppy because of all the ways in which the puppy would make Taylor happy. Taylor was looking forward to doing the things Taylor wanted, but hadn't thought to consider what the puppy might want or need beyond the most basic physical requirements of eating and potty breaks. Although your interaction was very short, in the days after meeting you, Taylor starts to consider things from the dog's perspective more often. While Taylor sometimes struggles to respect a declined invitation for petting, Taylor begins to feel a strong connection during interactions that are voluntary. Taylor also starts to watch and listen for what the puppy is saying about petting preferences, and adjusts to meet those preferences. Taylor also learns to anticipate when the pup is tired and recognizes it might not be so nice to interrupt a nap just because Taylor wants snuggling. Taylor successfully balances between personal wants and needs, and those of the puppy.

Second impact:

Before getting a puppy, Taylor expected that a basic manners class was required to be a good owner, but didn't see the purpose of additional training. After meeting you, Taylor keeps your lesson in mind when picking a training class. Taylor looks carefully at the options, considering what might best fit the puppy, and chooses a class that prioritizes focusing on the dog's perspective. Class reinforces the messages you introduced, and gives Taylor additional coached practice at empathizing and seeking-consent. During the class, Taylor sees the dog actively enjoy training and finds that the idea of more training sounds like it could be fun. Taylor thinks about what dog sports would be fun for both of them, and makes choices about training to suit the dog's needs and temperament as well as Taylor's own interests.

Third impact:

Taylor is now safer around all dogs because every interaction with a dog involves an invitation. Taylor stops, invites an interaction, listens to a dog's feedback, and is also comfortable when a dog prefers not to interact. Taylor doesn't take it personally when a friend's shy and fearful dog does not want to come and say hello. This reduces the pressure on the shy dog, preventing the opportunity for a conflict.

Fourth impact:

Taylor, who is now practiced at empathizing and seeking consent, finds these concepts spilling over beyond just the dogs. When dating, Taylor thinks more about the wants and needs of the other person. Taylor asks for permission for intimate interactions, considers the feelings of a partner, and frequently checks in to make sure there is continued consent. Taylor has fewer opportunities for misunderstanding or conflict during intimate interactions, and Taylor practices being a thoughtful and compassionate partner.

Fifth and sixth impact:

As time passes, Taylor becomes a parent. Taylor's empathizing and consent-seeking are such strong habits they require little conscious thought or effort. Taylor naturally slips into using these same skills with the new baby. Taylor models a healthy way to interact with dogs that the child can eventually mimic. Additionally, Taylor is also a more responsive, understanding, and compassionate parent. Coping with the frustrations of parenting is easier because Taylor can consider the world from baby's perspective. Tantrums are about baby's feeling frustrated or tired, not about a power struggle with Taylor. Taylor is also quick to notice moments when the dog is uncomfortable as baby starts to crawl, and is quick to seek support, and find ways to help both dog and child feel comfortable.

Exponential impacts:

Growing up with a parent like Taylor, the child has empathy and consent-seeking modeled at every age and stage. The child is safer than other children around dogs because the only habit the child knows is inviting an interaction and respecting a dog when it says no. The child has no thought that you could simply walk up to a dog and touch it without first asking the dog for permission.

The child also has more body awareness than other children, and is empowered to respect both self and others. The child knows you can say no to a hug or touch, and that you needed to ask for consent before hugging or touching others. The child is practicing empathy through habits even before brain development allows for true empathetic feelings. This means those feelings come more easily and naturally as the child grows. The child shows greater tolerance for different people, cultures, religions, and ideas because of the practice of empathy. The child has fewer conflicts and fights because consent-seeking is almost instinctual. The child grows into an adult who shares these same skills with others – creating a cycle of positive change. Humanity is improved in a small way, and the world becomes just a little better.

Conclusion:

Considering that something very small can ultimately have huge impact is not a new concept. It is easily forgotten, however, when our perspective narrows during the rush and bustle of our daily lives. While refining and expanding our technical skills as trainers is important, so is taking the time to recognize that the work we do is deeper than just ‘sit’, ‘down’, and ‘come when called’. We are in the relationship building business. We stretch people’s empathy and shift their expectations. This is deep and meaningful work for our dogs and clients, but also for ourselves. And it can become even more powerful when we step back to look at those bigger pictures, and consider tsunamis our tiny drops in the bucket might just create.

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Kate is the owner of Pretty Good Dog, LLC. She works exclusively with new and expecting families and their dogs with a specialty in child-dog conflict cases. Kate has been a licensed Family Paws Parent Educator since 2009, serves on the board for Twin Cities Obedience Training Club, and is a strong advocate for dog safety and awareness education. Kate is also involved with research examining heart rate variability and aggression in dog.

Invited Interaction (AKA Pat, Pet, Pause):

A method of asking for consent from a dog before and during physically interacting.

Steps:

1. Invite an interaction (Pat your leg to get the dog’s attention and ask the dog for permission).
2. Engage with respect (If the dog says yes, Pet Politely).
3. Regularly reassess (Pause your petting to ask for feedback and consent to continue).

Note: A dog always has the right to say no and/or go!