

Dogs & Wolves

2 Instincts & Behaviours

Understanding the instincts and behaviours of dogs and wolves. For dog trainers and the interested dog-owner.



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Instincts And Behaviours

*In this essay, I will try to give you a **practical** understanding of instincts and behaviours; the sort of understanding that is of use to a dog owner or trainer. This means that I have approached the subject and the definitions of various things within it from a completely different viewpoint from that which an academic animal behaviourist would use.*

What you will learn here will help you to understand why dogs and wolves do what they do in the real world.

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One of the difficult things about writing a document like this is in deciding what to leave out. Opinions on this will vary from trainer to trainer and owner to owner but there has to be a limit somewhere and that means that something – or rather, a whole lot of things – will have to take a back seat. This document was designed with two purposes in mind. Firstly to provide information that is most often - for whatever reasons - missing or unreliable in published material; If you read something here that contradicts what you have read in a book or website then on average you should believe what it says here. Secondly, this document acts as a focus to draw together, in one place, the key facts and truths upon which understanding of the subject depends.

This essay is mostly aimed at people wanting to be dog trainers and the interested owner and is written from the standpoint that what matters is the truth about the subject, not political correctness, trendy theory or cult dogma. You will find no platitudes here, just fact and truth as near as I can record the two. It is designed to be read in its correct place in the sequence of other essays in this series. If you have not read the preceding essay(s) in this series yet, then you may not appreciate the meaning and rationale behind various terms which are discussed in the other essays.

In this essay, I have tried to account as best I can for the differences between individual dogs. One can almost never say things like “no dog ever ...” or “every dog will always..” because dogs are all different. Even if instead one says things like “most dogs..” one will inevitably run into the person who has never met “a dog that does..”. If you have never met a dog that does anything mentioned here then all I can suggest is that you enlighten us and write your own essay on dogs.

When you make up your mind who to believe about a subject, how do you decide ? Do you want to believe what your friends do, what your parents approve of, what makes you feel happy or just the bald, uncomfortable truth for its own sake ? In dog training ,looking at the published material, you certainly have the choice. In writing this essay, I have simply taken the role of informed but dispassionate observer and analytical recorder. I have no ideological axes to grind, no complexes to indulge and I am not in anyone’s theory and dogma camp. When I promote an idea, it is because that idea works in the real world; when I debunk one, it is because no matter how much water it holds in the world of theory and popular books, it doesn’t hold any in the real, hands-on world. What you read here is bald - perhaps uncomfortable - truth for its own sake

1 Instincts and behaviours

1.1 *Defining instincts and behaviours*

1.1.1 Instincts

The behaviour of dogs was hardly understood at all in an analytical sense until the mid twentieth century. By then, advances in the overall scope and precision of animal behaviour as a subject had begun to lead to a systematic approach to understanding the development, purpose and modes of employment of the behaviours we see in dogs.

The pioneering work on conditioned reflexes by Pavlov at the end of the nineteenth century and further work on conditioned behaviours by Skinner in the early twentieth century laid the foundations upon which succeeding generations would build the modern understanding of dog behaviour.

By the 1960's, it was broadly acknowledged that dogs were almost certainly a direct descendent of wolves and much of this belief was driven by the fact that studies were revealing almost complete correspondence in the behaviours of (what were then considered to be) the two separate species. Many experiments were performed in wolf and dog behaviour in the final decades of the twentieth century and much information was gathered by people such as Michael Fox and Erich Klinghammer. The intense similarities were increasingly noted and the final confirmation of genetic near-identity by the Smithsonian Institute in the mid 1990's provided the validating link between the study of wolf behaviour and that of dog behaviour.

Since then research into wolf and dog behaviour has progressed in parallel as it is now broadly accepted that dog behaviour is, in fact, a mutated and evolved version of the behaviour set of the ancestral wolf. Many authorities believe that the difficulty of understanding dog behaviour with its many mysteries and contradictions can be more easily understood by looking first at the original purpose, motivation and relationships between behaviours in the ancestral wolf. By understanding how certain behaviours have been modified in the selection and breeding of dogs, it would then be possible to work out the purpose, relationships and motivations of behaviours – and lack of them - seen in dogs.

For the purposes of this section on instincts and behaviours I shall consider those of the wolf and relate these to dogs.

Essentially, like all animals, wolves are driven by a set of life-needs which can be categorised under a short list of titles. Each title is called an “instinct”. The list includes but is not restricted to:

- Self Preservation
- Territorial protection
- Prey acquisition (hunting)
- Social interaction
- Mating
- Parenting
- Play

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- Exploration
- Self-care

Each need (instinct title) is served by – or you might say ‘contains’ - two sets of behaviours reserved for it, a) innate behaviours and b) learned behaviours. The great intelligence of dogs and wolves allows learned behaviours to contribute maximally to each need. (We will look at these two categories of behaviour later in detail).

So, each of the titles in the above list is, in fact, an **instinct**. It is important to remember this definition:

- **An instinct is just a category of life-need, not knowledge or intention or action or something an animal does**
- **An instinct is therefore nothing but the title at the top of a list of behaviours (actions).**

This means that each of those instinct titles I have given should be followed by a list of behaviours and later, I will list and discuss the behaviours that fall under each heading.

At all times, an animal is experiencing at least one life-need – it’s looking for food (prey instinct), looking after itself (Eg. grooming, sleeping etc.) (self-care instinct), competing socially (social instinct) etc. This simply – and rather obviously - means that at all times, the animal is either already producing behaviours that belong to one of the instincts or is receiving stimulation of some kind to do so. We can say that “at all times, an animal is under the control of one of its instincts” which is the official way to word what I have just said but the problem with describing the situation this way is that it leads people into thinking that an instinct is some kind of real, physical thing that can, in some sense “control” an animal. It leads to a fuzzy understanding of the word “instinct” because an instinct can’t control anything, it’s just a title at the top of a list of behaviours. Later, we will look at correct and incorrect ways to describe things to do with instincts and how to use the word “instinct” itself exactly instead of fuzzily.

The need an animal is experiencing can switch rapidly between two or more instincts (behaviour lists). Sometimes, the animal can even appear to seize up in indecision if it is facing some kind of conflicting, double opportunity or problem which requires contradictory behaviours that fall under more than one instinct. Think about what a wolf would do if it was mating and a grizzly bear tried to attack it – it seriously needs to finish mateing (a behaviour in the mating instinct list) but it also needs to run away (a behaviour from the self-preservation instinct list).

It is quite difficult for us humans to imagine this kind of thing because we really show very little strong demarcation between instincts. A lot of our behaviours are much more generalised and most serve more than one life-need (they occur in more than one instinct list). Animals too have generalised behaviours that serve more than one life-need but they just seem to have a lot less of them.

It is not possible to make a table of the relative strengths of the instincts because they are nothing but words. It is the nature of the behaviours within each instinct and their relative strengths within an individual animal that decide how strong a particular instinct may appear to us to be.

There is no single, authoritative list of instincts and different authorities tend to have their personal preferences although the list given above would be accepted by many. On average, most authorities identify somewhere between about 9 and 12 instincts. Some would dispense with the maternal

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