

Dogs & Wolves

3 Packs & Families

Social aspects of the human relationship with dogs – and occasionally, wolves. For dog trainers and the interested dog-owner.



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There is much talk of the relationship between the social behaviour of dogs and wolves and how the similarities may or may not affect our relationship with dogs. The majority of this theorising originates from people who have never actually raised, kept and built a relationship with both wolves and dogs as the author has. To a person who has done so, much of this theorising is blatantly inaccurate and over-simplified and occasionally even smacks of simple controversy-mongering. To the person who has worked regularly hands-on with both wolves and dogs, it is always easy to spot the output from people who haven't; it is obvious that they don't own wolves and they don't work with them. What they say might convince another such person but it does not convince someone who has worked with both.

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, cult dogma or sensationalism. 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 Living with dogs

People often question the necessity to understand anything about wolves and what they do in order to aid in training – and living with – dogs. Some tell us that dogs are aren't wolves and that it's wicked, irrelevant (and that wonderful word "crewel") to infer or learn anything from wolves to aid our understanding of dogs. Others though, tell us that dogs are wolves and we have to be the pack-leader. The truth, of course, lies outside these two narrow and simplistic opinion sets. The fact is that dogs are the descendants of wolves; they have some things in common with them and some things that are uniquely "dog". By definition, between these two sets – what they have in common and what they don't – you have described the whole dog. If you shut your eyes to either of them then you are not addressing the whole dog when you live with and train one, you are only addressing half of it and you will only get half a result. If you want to be a successful trainer then you have no option but to understand and use both. In fact, no matter what opinion you subscribe to, if you live in peace with a dog and train one even occasionally then you are already exploiting elements from both sides whether you are aware of it or not.

Do you actually *need* to know what things dogs have in common with wolves and what they don't? Suppose wolves had become extinct hundreds of years ago so that we knew nothing of their behaviour. Would it matter? Would we still be able to train and live with dogs?

Yes, to both. Of course we could. We would however, never understand exactly why dogs do some of the things they do. We would not know why the methods we use are necessary or why they work and why they sometimes don't seem to work with certain dogs. Put it this way, you could probably get qualified as a space-engineer to take charge of designing space rockets in spite of deliberately choosing to know nothing at all about the first Apollo moon flights. Your peers though would regard you with suspicion. You would probably be labelled "weird" or "narrow-minded" and would never be entirely trusted to the point of being in charge of such things – and justifiably; people who deliberately wear blinkers fall over things!

Knowledge without understanding is notoriously questionable and unreliable, Unfortunately, human beings have a certain propensity to seek exactly this state and it leads to the lazy pursuit of "magic-bullets" and "formulas" all of which relieve the user of the burden of researching, understanding and analysing for themselves. It's so easy to just espouse Mrs. X's training method or dog-house-rules formula and preach it to everyone else than to work the stuff out for yourself. If you want to train dogs effectively though, you will have to learn to live substantially without magic bullets and formulas and understand how what you are doing works and therefore why it sometimes doesn't. This, in turn, means that we are going to