

Animal Behavior

Our topics for this week are:

- Prey and Predator Behaviors
- Social Dominance
- Causes of Irreparable Handling Resistance

Anthropomorphism

Animals are not simply hairier versions of humans. Reacting to animals as if they are humans is called *anthropomorphism*, and anthropomorphism is not effective in establishing a safe and effective relationship with animals. In our podcast Abby has some anthropomorphic characteristics to provide interest and additional perspectives. I am fully aware that she is a dog, and exceptional one but a dog, with dog behaviors, and dog attributes. I speak to her as if she is human but I treat her as a dog. HOWEVER, Abby often thinks she is a human, so we must tolerate her fantasy. An important foundation for proper animal handling is learning the normal behavior for the species. Knowing the natural instincts of a species is essential to being able to handle, move, and contain them humanely with minimal stress and risk of injury to either the handler or the animals.

Most communications between animal species is silent, i.e., “body language.” Behavior and attitude of animals should be assessed by observing them at a distance before an approach for handling. Animals will begin assessing handlers by the handler’s body language upon first notice of presence of the handler and modifying their own behavior. For example, prey animals will often mask signs of illness or injury particularly in the presence of strangers. Not approaching them immediately will reduce some of the threat they might otherwise perceive. It is essential to not be perceived by animals as either their predator or being of lesser social rank to them. Rank of all animals is primarily based on deference, not by actual fighting.

Most animals will telegraph, in advance, their intent to display open aggression. The natural tendency is to avoid, if possible, the possibility of injury and death. Therefore, barking or other vocalizations, lunging, pawing, fake charging, and other indications usually precede an attack on an apparent adversary. The human at which these behaviors are directed should know the meaning of these warnings and not ignore or minimize the signs.

Handling Resistance

Avoidance of handling resistance in animals requires early socialization with humans and never causing pain or extreme fear. The causes of irreparable handling resistance in animals are:

- Failure to properly socialize animals in their juvenile period of life
- Infliction of pain at any age
- Exposure to extremely fearful situations at any age

PREDATOR OR PREY BEHAVIOR

All domestic animals evolved as either meat eaters (predators) or food for meat eaters (prey). Common small domestic animals, i.e., dogs and cats, are genetically predators. Common large domestic animals, such as horses, cattle, sheep, and goats are genetically prey. Hogs and rats can be either, depending on the circumstances.

Predators

Predators have eyes that are positioned forward in their skulls, which permits greater overlapping of the field of vision from right and left eyes, and improves depth of vision. Predators stare directly at their prey and are able to track the movement and judge speed of their prey. Dogs are pack predators that run after their prey. They are instinctively more aggressive if in a group. They are more aggressive to humans with small stature, and if body language is fearful, especially when a human runs away as a prey animal would do.

Cats are solitary hunting, stalking predators. High-pitched sounds and wiggly movements stimulate their predator urges. They have explosive movements used to quickly pounce at their prey from a short distance away. If threatened and immediate escape is not possible, they will remain motionless as a first stage. If the threat continues, they will attempt to warn the threat away by hissing and striking. Finally, there will be an explosive attempt to flee or to attack and then flee.

Prey

Prey animals have eyes that are located on the sides of their skulls. This reduces their depth of vision, but increases their range of vision and detection of motion. Prey animals monitor their peripheral environment to detect the presence of predators. They do not stare at predators, except to access their intent and decide on a means of escape.

Cattle, sheep, goats, and horses are prey animals. Their primary defense tactic is to flee. Attacks usually do not occur except when fleeing is not an option. Prey animals seek protection in groups. Although they should not be separated entirely from herd members, horses, cattle, and hogs should be moved in small groups to avoid mob action by a large group. Sheep can be moved safely in larger groups.

Common situations that can elicit fear in prey animals are shiny objects, including sparkling reflections on water or shiny metal. High-pitched sounds are often made by prey captured by a predator, therefore clanging, squeaky, or hissing noises, such as gates, squeeze chutes, dandling chains, exhaust fans, and air hoses are frightening to prey animals. Rapid movements evoke fear, such as blowing plastic bags or fluttering banners or flags. Jerky movements by handlers can scare prey animals, as can fan blades that are turned off and blow with the wind. Anything that is unfamiliar in familiar surroundings can be frightening, including clothing, paper bags or cups, different flooring, different panels, puddles of water, or grates in an alleyway. Darkness or blinding glare is avoided by prey animals since either can impair their safety from predators.

Perception of Handlers as Predators or Prey

A handler's body language may unintentionally mimic prey or predator behavior. Humans have predator eyes, directed forward. Because of this, staring at prey animals is perceived as a threat. Moving directly toward them is the pushing approach of a pack predator designed to encourage them to run before a kill. A human standing motionless is like that of a stalking predator, especially if the prey animals are being stared at. The least threatening actions are to have relaxed movements while approaching at an angle without looking directly at the animal. This is the demeanor of another grazing prey animal.

Dogs interpret a human running away from them as prey behavior. Staring directly at dogs or standing over them is considered a challenge for dominance. Playing with cats by wiggly a finger or toe can unintentionally invite a predator attack to a hand or foot.

ANIMAL HIERARCHY: SOCIAL DOMINANCE

Each animal is an individual, the total of a unique combination of genes and past experiences. General assumptions about behavior might be made based on species, age, gender, and breed, but an individual animal may act and react in a unique fashion.

Nearly all domestic animals prefer to live in groups. Within animal groups there is a hierarchy, a social ladder. With birds this is referred to as the pecking order. Knowing the social rank of an individual animal mingling in a group can be helpful in determining the best means of handling or restraint of a particular animal. When waiting for a group of gathered animals to settle, it is a good practice to assess the social interactions within a group.

Many animal behaviorists dislike the terms "dominance, dominate, or dominant" when applied to social rank among animals or to a handler of animals. To some, these terms infer to force actions upon another individual although the root word from Latin is *dominus*, meaning "master." Being a master of animals denotes social rank but does not necessitate the use of force to acquire or maintain that status.

Being dominant requires the control of resources, such as access to food, and movement of others. Dominant status is conveyed primarily by demeanor. Force that inflicts pain is reserved for self-defense or defense of the species, such as conflicts during mating seasons. An effective animal handler must be dominant, by their demeanor, not by applied force or micromanagement, to animals being handled for the safety of both. On the other hand, a handler of large animals must be prepared and willing to exert force as a last resort for self-defense as in the case of a charge, or threatened charge, by a large dog, bull, ram, buck, stallion, protective nursing mare or cow, or in a similar situation.

Dominance within a group is generally related to height, weight, gender, age, or in the case of ruminants, the size of their horns. The oldest ewe is the most dominant sheep and the oldest doe goat is the herd leader. Dominant animals are identifiable by the deference given them by others, not by displays of aggression and force. Dominant animals are more calm and confident than others and will seek a position physically above others. For example, dominant horses prefer to be on rises in the land, dominant cats on ledges, and dominating dogs will attempt to stand over submissive dogs. Dominant individuals within a group of prey animals will seek the center of the group. Higher social rank is usually established by demeanor with direct

stares, ritualized aggressive postures, vocalizing, and fake attacks without attempts to cause serious injury, such as boxing in young stallions and wrestling between young dogs.

The previous status of a group member, or that of an animal handler, can be altered within a group of animals if the demeanor of the group member or handler is different than usual. Acting ill, injured, or less confident as with advanced age can reduce the status of the individual within a group. Handlers who attempt to manage animal groups while ill, after becoming injured, or acting uncharacteristically timid, may be challenged by a group, particularly if the animal group is swine or poultry.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Whether a species was a predator or prey before domestication significantly affects its overall behavior
- Irreparable resistance to handling can result from the lack of socialization in early life or from prior painful and/or fearful handling experiences
- The behavior of individual animals is associated with their social rank within a group of their own species

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at <https://www.betteranimalhandling.com/>

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.

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