



OF HOSTAGES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Do you need to isolate a dog or limit playtime with other dogs or people?

By Suzanne Clothier

He said that he loved her. He said that his relationship with her mattered almost more than anything else in his life. He said that he enjoyed working with her, and sharing new ideas. To be sure, she never took her eyes off his face, paying no heed to the audience who waited breathlessly to hear his secrets for such adoration, such undivided attention.

"First," he said, "I never let her talk to anyone but me. When I leave for work, I lock her in a room, which is pretty boring for her, but when I get home - oh, is she ever glad to see me! If she wants to do anything, except go to the bathroom, she has to do it with me. I control her food, her exercise and all her activities. Wherever we go, I insist that she always look at me, so I know for sure she's paying absolute attention. I don't let her have any friends, because they might distract her or use up the energy she needs for working. Being the only social contact she has, I am very important to her. Naturally, she'd rather be with me than anyone else."

The audience didn't gasp. They didn't protest in any way. They didn't stand up and tell him that was archaic, outrageous treatment. They did not shout out that this was not, could not be, the secret of a healthy, happy relationship. Instead, they nodded, and took notes. They thought this made perfect sense.

Was this some sensationalistic talk show featuring, "Taking A Hostage - Key to a Happy Relationship?" Unfortunately, it was not Geraldo or Sally. This was a dog training seminar, and "he" was talking about "her" - his dog. (And while I say "he", this attitude is certainly not limited to male trainers but applies equally to female trainers.) If this had been a man talking about his wife, or a mother discussing how she raised her kids, the audience would have been, rightfully, appalled. But it was, after all, only a dog, and these were techniques claimed to be helpful to top competitive performance.

If we examine the theories behind the methodology, we come up with some pretty scary notions. While long appalled by the notion of needing to isolate a dog to improve his willingness to work with you, I began to wonder why this concept not only was "successful" (if, in defining success you are willing to discard a healthy, normal relationship and focus only on competitive performance) but sounded vaguely familiar. The answer? "The Stockholm Syndrome," a psychological phenomenon named after the people in a Stockholm bank who were held hostage. In this syndrome, those forcibly taken hostage, surprisingly, develop positive feelings for their captors.

To understand the Stockholm Syndrome, you must understand the effects of sensory deprivation. Imagine, if you can, being forcibly removed from your daily life (with all its familiar environments, routines and social interactions) and put in a strange place from which you cannot escape. Your only interactions are with your captors, whose behavior can be capricious - that is, beyond your ability to understand why or when

they may choose to do something for you, with you or to you. They may withhold food and/or water, in order to raise its value to you in order to receive your compliance with their demands. You may be left in complete silence or darkness with nothing to do, nowhere to go. You may not be allowed to talk or interact with other prisoners.

It would appear that a reasonable (human) response to this would be anger. To be sure, this is often the initial response of any hostage. Yet, as the hostages in the Stockholm bank demonstrated, the desire for survival quickly supercedes hostility. Your entire world now revolves around your captor(s), and within the sensory vacuum in which you now exist, their moods and actions become all consuming. Anticipating their desires, appeasing them - these are the possible keys to survival. Further, deprived of normal social interaction, you begin to see your captors more sympathetically. In the original Swedish case, investigators were astonished to hear the freed hostages asking for leniency for their captors.

For any social creature (man, whales, gorillas, wolves, horses, dogs, chimpanzees, dolphins), the quickest way to create neurosis and abnormal behaviors is social isolation and a sterile sensory environment. Within the zoological community, the greatest success rates in terms of animal mortality, health and normal breeding and rearing of offspring occurs with animals who are allowed normal social groups and interactions, and whose environments are as varied and rich as a zoo can manage to provide.

In the horse breeding community, stallions are often isolated from contact with other horses, and are notoriously neurotic, displaying self-mutilating behaviors and high levels of aggression. I have worked with stallions who were allowed to interact normally with other horses, turned out in green pastures to play, and given demanding work schedules at high levels of training. These horses were intelligent, sane and an absolute pleasure to work with. I have also been in a barn where every one of the horses demonstrated neurotic behavior. These poor animals were so carefully protected in the name of performance in the show ring that their lives consisted of little more than being held hostage in a beautifully maintained cell.

A review of child development books and theories reveals that an important key to well adjusted, productive and healthy children is a wide ranging exposure to a variety of people and relationships, environments, activities and ideas. It is hard to imagine any rational person advocating that children be isolated and sensory deprived so that they could achieve better grades or respond more perfectly to their parent's desires. And it takes very little imagination to grasp what the effects of such isolation might be on the average child.

Consider the concept that dogs should have limited, if any, play or social interactions with other dogs. The rationale here

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is that a dog dealing with another dog must either be dominant or submissive. In having to learn the rules of normal dog behavior, these trainers believe that these dogs will have their fragile egos irreparably damaged by having to submit to other dogs, or become unduly dominant, thus rendering them incapable of successful competitive work. Does this really make sense? What happened to stable dogs who can actually deal with life? I read one article where the author carefully explained how each new group of dogs required a sorting of social hierarchy, and that if the that group changed at all, the dogs would need to sort it out all over again. What a surprise! Every time you (also a social animal subject to power structures and dominance hierarchies) enter a room of other people, the same process repeats itself. It is through such repeated interactions and sorting that you come to some sense of who you are no matter what group you are in. The most confident dogs I know are dogs who extremely well socialized, and able to handle themselves in almost any setting.

There is a grain of truth here - a very small grain at best. There is no question that an inappropriate playmate can scare the pants off a dog (especially a puppy), sometimes leaving a serious and lasting impression. There is no question that a dog who is an absolute bully with other dogs may make a lousy competitive dog - lacking respect or sense or both, no doubt he could be found wanting when it comes to respecting and cooperating with a human. But the larger truth here is that a normal dog who is properly and thoroughly socialized, allowed to develop appropriate manners, and who knows when to politely bow deep and when to hold his head high is a dog who is not easily shaken by odd encounters.

What these trainers fear most of all is that their dog will come to prefer dogs as playmates rather than the handler. They will even tell you this in no uncertain language. My question is, if the dog would rather play with another dog than work with you, doesn't that tell you something? If your spouse preferred to spend his/her weekends with another man/woman, wouldn't that be a clue? Let's pretend that you adore checkers, and attend every checkers tournament that comes to town. One day, you decide that your child/spouse/friend (choose one) should also enjoy checkers as you do. As you sit enraptured by the fine points of multiple jumps, your guest sees a squirrel in the tree outside the window. "Gosh," he/she says as they leap from their seat, "I didn't realize there were squirrels around here!" And off they go to stare up a tree, finding this much more fun than watching checkers with you. BIG hint there, eh?

It is possible to have a relationship based on mutual respect, free from anything that remotely resembles sensory deprivation, and still have a dog who will work his heart out for you and even more importantly, with you. Since I do not choose to compete in the obedience or agility ring, there are some readers who, mistakenly equating titles achieved with knowledge earned, will question my basis for this statement.

In my many years of involvement with dogs, it is the two plus years of working with my dog as a Search & Rescue team that has taught me the most about what is possible between

a dog and a human in a working relationship. On our first official search, what few joys the formal obedience ring held for me evaporated in a moonlit cornfield somewhere in Pennsylvania as I watched my dog work and work and work, with me, off lead under bizarre circumstances. . . until the sun came up.

I watched my search partner, a young German Shepherd named Chilkat, play sticks and "keep away" with other dogs in the search unit as we prepare for a practice search. A quiet whistle or call brings him to me instantly ready for work, which means a scent discrimination exercise that could last up to two hours in pouring rain, freezing cold or blistering heat. Walking through a park with 7 off lead dogs, I have sent a friend to hide, and without having to dispose of the other dogs, put Chilkat on a formal search command. He is at work in a flash, ignoring even the puppy's attempts to restart their game of a moment ago. In both cases, when his job is done, Chilkat happily returns to playing with the other dogs, groveling appropriately to his elders or giving a pesty puppy notice that her manners are somewhat lacking.

On real searches, I have hiked over strange farm fields in the middle of the night, watching my dog ignore other dogs, farm animals, even rabbits and deer that flushed under his very feet. I have watched him work for four straight hours on a mountaintop after an hour's climb (past a black bear and cubs) to our start point. His only failing in that working situation was his refusal to rest more than three minutes, a fact my weary legs found nearly unforgivable!

The notion of having to artificially insure that my dogs found me incredibly interesting disturbs me. If I ever found myself in any relationship with a healthy being (human, canine, equine, or any other species) where I had to cajole, bribe, pay or take hostage my intended pal in order to assure their interest in me, I'd have to take a very long hard look in the mirror.

In the case of unhealthy or unbalanced beings, such as very sick or emotionally disturbed animals or people, I have indeed made unusual foods, exciting games and/or extra attention my opening bids in the friendship game. And I did so with full recognition that as they were at that moment, a normal relationship was not possible, and that I chose to interact with them in an unbalanced way. But I did not withhold normal food, access to independent play or playmates, or my attention. That is not a relationship, or a friendship. It may be an appropriate interaction between organism and source of stimuli, but I need more from dogs than simple, conditioned responses. I have dogs first and foremost as my friends, and I do my damndest to treat them as such. I often fail to be as generous and unflagging a friend to my dogs as they are to me. But I'm learning.

The dog is commonly referred to as "man's best friend." I wish that dogs could talk, if only to gain their perspective on what that really means for them. Perhaps, like the hostages in Stockholm, some of our dogs would find themselves pleading for leniency for their captors.