

## The Lassie Effect

As a Dog Listener, I help people understand why their dog behaves in a certain way and how to correct unwanted behaviours such as excessive barking, pulling on the lead, aggression and so on, using a method called Amichien Bonding. This is a stress-free, gadget free method that uses positive re-enforcement, enabling the owner to have a dog that wants to cooperate by its own free will. While most dog owners are aware of the attributes of their dog's breed, understanding their dog's ancient ancestry and its natural behaviours is something that is often misunderstood or misinterpreted, which can lead to problems for the owner.

### A quick history lesson...

Man and dog have been together a long time. Genetic studies based on DNA have helped to establish the origins of dogs, suggesting the wolf is the most likely ancestor of our dog (the DNA of a wolf compared to a dog differs by only 1 to 2 per cent, the same percentage that separates one human race to another)<sup>1</sup>. Fossil remains found in the Central Russian Plain suggest that domestication of dogs was at around fourteen thousand years ago, although the cooperation between man and dog in hunting is depicted in ancient artwork dating between 12,000 to 17,000 years. Some of the earliest historical records of dogs come from Egyptian art, suggesting there were over a dozen dog breeds ranging from Greyhounds, Bull Mastiffs to Basset Hounds.

### The Lassie effect...

Many people hold what I call the 'popular view' of dogs, this is based on humans projecting their interpretation of the world and their behaviours onto the dog, otherwise known as *anthropomorphism*. Literature and entertainment has greatly influenced our beliefs about dogs from 16<sup>th</sup> Century with Aesop's Fables to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century dog film stars like Rin Tin Tin and Lassie. Often when I am called in to help dog owners I see what I call "The Lassie Effect". Lassie was a Collie with the heart of a lion and the navigational instincts of a homing pigeon. Through his exploits on television and film spanning nearly a seventy year career, Lassie made the public believe that this dog could think, plan, sympathize, recognise good people from bad, feel pain, remember complicated facts, have unbelievable senses of hearing, sight and smell and seek revenge. In reality, when Lassie seemed to be looking around carefully to study a situation, he was actually watching his trainer wave a rag. Walt Disney is another great contributor to the anthropomorphism of dogs with cartoon characters such as Pluto and Goofy, and through animated films like 101 Dalmatians and The Lady and the Tramp. Humanizing dogs continues today with cinema blockbusters such as Beethoven (1992), Cats & Dogs (2001), The Shaggy Dog Story (2006), Underdog (2007) and more recently with Beverley Hills Chihuahua (2008) and Hotel for Dogs (2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Book: Coren, Stanley (2006) *The intelligence of dogs*, Pocket Books, chapter 2, page 24.

It seems we find it easier to relate to a situation when we project our own emotions and thought patterns onto the actions of our dogs. It is easy to fall into this trap, as the loyalty and devotion our pet demonstrates as part of its natural instincts as a pack animal closely mimics the human idea of love and friendship. But humanizing a dog's behaviour can lead to misunderstanding and problems arising for the owner. For example, a dog chews up his owner's pair of shoes while the owner is at work, when the owner returns home and discovers the damage, the owner gets angry and shouts at the dog, in turn the dog lowers his body and slinks away. Many people believe the dog learns from his 'telling off', teaching the dog that chewing is wrong. Some may also believe the dog has chewed the shoes out of resentment for being left alone, but when the owner finds his shoes and is upset the dog feels guilty about what he has done which is why he looks and acts in a guilty manner, lowering himself down and slinking away. In reality, however, the dog may be anxious when he is left alone, so the chewing action gives him comfort which is therefore rewarding, meaning the dog will chew again and again to make himself feel better. When the owner comes home, the dog behaves in a submissive manner in an attempt to avoid punishment but the owner has interpreted the dog's body language of "*please don't hurt me*", to be "*I know I have done wrong*". This is a classic example of how misconceptions can arise when we humanize dog behaviour, believing dogs are capable of pre-mediated thought and retribution as seen in entertainment with the likes of Lassie. Often the Walt Disney view of dogs is easier to relate to for us humans because we want our dogs to be clever, loyal and moral. But in reality, dogs are pre-wired for survival, they are predators; food is of prime importance, as is staying safe and reproducing. While dogs are capable of problem solving, they are incapable of linking actions that are separated by time. Dogs learn through a series of pleasant and unpleasant experiences which occur within two seconds of a particular action, which is why timing is so important when rewarding a dog for good behaviour or teaching him consequence of action for his bad behaviour. Only humans have the ability to understand a punishment being inflicted is the result of some earlier unwanted action. So, when the disgruntled dog owner finds his chewed shoes and shouts at the dog, the dog does not link the punishment with him chewing the shoes, as he may have chewed the shoes two minutes or even two hours earlier. Therefore, shouting at the dog does not stop this unwanted chewing behaviour, in fact it could make the situation worse as the dog becomes more stressed and so the chewing increases as he seeks comfort.

Although man and dog have been together for thousands of years it would be wrong to assume that time has given us an understanding of dog's behaviour without ever humanizing it. It is our basic human nature to put our own values and behaviours onto animals, which has been buoyed by anecdotes, literature and entertainment over the centuries. The work of behaviourists and trainers like Jan Fennell 'The Dog Listener', has brought us an understanding of how events affect an animal's behaviour and how dogs learn, and this has led to the development of our modern reward based training methods today. But being a good dog owner is not only about providing a comfortable and stimulating environment for the pet, it is about having a basic appreciation of dog's natural behaviours. By doing so, we do not set dogs up to fail with our high expectations; instead we can embrace the behaviours and adapt so we can have the relationship both man and dog deserve.

Note:

For more information about Jan Fennell 'The Dog Listener', log onto [www.janfennellthedoglistener.com](http://www.janfennellthedoglistener.com)