

Episode: #309

Behavior Is Communication: Decode Your Dog By Understanding Their 5 Core Needs

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Think of your dog behaving at its absolute worst. What are the thoughts that come to your mind? Is it 'he knows better', 'he's being stubborn', 'he's ticking me off', 'he's frustrating the heck out of me'? I had a question on social media recently, 'What is the biggest dog training challenge I've ever faced?'

And it got me thinking about dog training challenges in general, and approaches that I used to have to overcoming dog training challenges and why I would never do some of the things I did in the past. I'm gonna share with you one in particular and give you a list of what really might be happening with your dog.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Many years ago, I taught at obedience school, and the way we taught owners to deal with puppy nipping, for example, was to grab the puppy's collar and give them a quick clip under the chin, like two or three times if they came back and bit again. I want you to sit on that for a little bit.

Now, if you are somebody like me who believes behavior is just communication and also believes that all solutions should be found in reinforcement. That solution might be a little triggering to you, as I've got to admit it is to me because I did it to dogs 35 years ago.

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So think about, I asked ChatGPT, 'What are the biggest challenges people face with their pet dogs today?' Here's a list. I'm gonna just go whip through. I want you to think about, what are the solutions to these challenges. Pulling on leash, jumping on people, excessive barking, not coming when called, counter surfing, potty training in that not going so swell, chewing up the furniture, digging in the yard.

Separation anxiety, inability to settle, reactivity to other dogs, reactivity to strangers, chasing cars, bikes, kids, resource guarding, fearfulness, anxiety, just doesn't listen, begs for food, completely destroys anything that's not his and keeps it away, intolerant of nail trimming or grooming, intolerant of the crate.

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So, there was 20 of what ChatGPT assured me was the biggest challenges pet owners like you who's listening is faced with. And if you believe like me, which I hope by the end of this you do, that behavior is communication, what could they possibly be communicating?

And that goes back to the question, what is the biggest training challenge that I've ever faced? And my answer was, I believe every dog trainer's biggest challenges are emotional challenges. Challenges when a dog's needs aren't met. But when you can source the problem, the solution is often much easier than you would think.

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So, if you think about, what are the needs of our dogs, now their needs are gonna change depending on the age and the stage of the dog. Obviously, a puppy is going to have different needs than say, a 3-year-old, but that 3-year-old will have different needs than say, a [17-year-old](#).



Episode: #309

Behavior Is Communication: Decode Your Dog By Understanding Their 5 Core Needs

00:03:28

And so, if you think about the basic needs, I'm gonna break them into five groups, and the last group might be a little bit weird or not as common as other people might describe it. So, the first one for me is a dog's emotional needs. Then their physical needs, their social needs, their mental needs, and what I call their daily thrive needs.

So, I'm just going to go quickly into each of these categories, some of which I've covered on previous Shaped by Dog podcasts. We'll leave that in the show notes for you, but I mean, I don't think there's any one big one because if one group of needs is not met, you are going to have behavioral problems and behavior is communication.

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The dog is communicating, "My needs are not being met. This is a need that's not being met." So, I'm starting off with you. You know, you could say physical needs are the most important. I'm gonna start off with the emotional needs because they're often overlooked.

So, when you think about [emotional needs](#), number one is psychological safety. Psychological safety is sometimes related to physical safety. That's a different issue. But psychological safety could be free from judgment. It could be free from blame. Even, you know, with some dogs, all you need to do is sigh.

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Now people will say things, "Well, the dog doesn't get that, you know, he's stupid. He doesn't know what I'm saying." How can we be 1000% sure our dog isn't interpreting our emotions and understanding the meaning behind it? I personally believe they can.

Science has already proven they have a high ability to react to their owner's emotions. So, [I don't like to call my dogs names](#). I don't like to say anything and say, "Oh, maybe he doesn't understand." Like saying things [like], "Oh, I'm feeding all the dogs today, but I'm not feeding you because you chewed up my favorite slippers."

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You're just joking. He doesn't understand, or does he? So psychological safety is encouraging curiosity in your dog and not trying to subdue it, because a lot of times curiosity comes in the form of a dog using their mouth, especially a puppy. Curiosity comes in the form of a puppy running around with something you'd rather them not run around with.

But hey, that's where management comes in, right? Management, because we need to keep that puppy physically safe, but more on that later. So psychological safety is not putting that puppy in a place where they are anxious, where that location or that situation may lead to emotional outbursts.

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Psychological safety means that that dog has freedom to show you who they truly are. So, if a dog or a puppy is yelled at and physically harmed and threatened, and things are thrown at them, they are going to be so worried for their physical safety.

They have no psychological safety. You will never see who they truly are. That's probably the biggest difference between my very first dogs that I trained with food lures and then corrections when they didn't do things right.



Episode: #309

Behavior Is Communication: Decode Your Dog By Understanding Their 5 Core Needs

00:06:32

They were on a chain collar, sometimes just a flat collar, "Hey, hey, hey!", boom. I have a VHS tape which, I mean, I don't know if you can still recover those VHS tapes of one of my most amazing dogs, my first Border Collie. And she was doing a retrieve.

She was maybe nine months old. She was amazing. Did I say she was amazing? She was just so talented. Nine months old, doing a retrieve in a formal obedience class. I didn't have my normal toy. I just borrowed somebody's. It was a tennis ball and a dirty old sock. So, I threw it out. She grabbed it, and as she ran, it kind of bounced and she thought this was a great old game.

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She started jumping up in the air and she ran off track, and she forgot what she was doing, and this video was so impactful to me. This would've happened in March of 1991. How many decades ago was that? And I can still remember this clip, because of my response to this puppy having fun.

I said, "Hey, hey, hey! Knock that off!", in that voice. Did that provide that puppy psychological safety or did that puppy hear, 'In my world, you don't show your true self. In my world, you tow a line, and you do as you are told, and you be the dog.'

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So, there's some sad feelings when I look back at that because wow, I would love a do-over with that dog. She was just so amazing. So emotional needs, a lot of behavior comes about when emotional needs are not met.

But certainly, physical is most important because if a dog doesn't get food and water, then their behavior is going to change. And the food ideally has great bioavailability to the dog. So, it gives them amazing nutrition.

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For my dogs, that means human grade meat and organic fruits and vegetables. That's how my dogs eat. It doesn't need to be how your dogs eat. But [that's how my dogs eat](#). I want them to have the best nutrition that I can give them. That also, you know, includes supplements, etc.

That food really needs to be age appropriate. AKA, if it's for a puppy or a senior, you need to adjust it. But senior doesn't mean all dogs over seven. Like I've got a 10-and-a-half-year-old dog who acts every bit like a 2 or 3-year-old dog. So senior isn't what a bag of dog food tells you it is.

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Senior is actually I think a lot of times it is dogs who don't have all of their needs met. They turn into seniors a lot younger than they should. So high quality food, age-appropriate food, and highly digestible food on a schedule that creates the dog's optimal digestion, whatever that means to you.

So, I think those are physical needs. That's one category, that's nutrition. Second physical need is sleep. And crazy again, depending on the age of the dog, puppies and geriatrics they sleep a lot longer.

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Puppies can sleep for like 18 hours or more. So, sleep, super, super important that you don't have like all these activities in your dog's day, that they do not get a chance to fully recharge the batteries. Because behavior is communication. I would say that's one of the big things you see in puppies.



Episode: #309

Behavior Is Communication: Decode Your Dog By Understanding Their 5 Core Needs

00:09:46

When they get the zoomies, when they start getting really bitey. A lot of times it's because you have not provided them with [enough sleep](#) that they need in the day. [Age-appropriate exercise](#). So, so many Shaped by Dog episodes where we've talked about what is appropriate for a puppy.

And I think mental stimulation and engagement is far more important than getting your puppy out on a leash and walking down the neighborhood. Walking down the neighborhood happens when they [understand what a leash is about](#) and how that they can earn reinforcement rather than pulling you all over the place on a leash.

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So, [age-appropriate exercise can be done in your living room downstairs](#), in your backyard, in a small safe area, in a fenced in area. So that's three physical needs. Fourth would be wellness. That would be your Veterinary visits, making sure there's no parasites. Doing your best to keep environmental toxins out of your dog's life.

Please, buy non perfumed cleaning agents. Buy healthy cleaning agents. Use things that you would be happy to lick because your dog is going to be licking. Okay, so those are some of the physical needs under the umbrella of physical needs that can affect your dog's behavior. And I got to tell you environmental toxins are a biggie.

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Scented candles? No, my friends. Things like, like an overabundance of electromagnetic waves in your home. No. Dogs are super sensitive. Okay, so we've got emotional needs, we've got physical needs. Next is social needs. So, knowing what your dog's social needs are starting from a puppy.

Obviously, we want them to be [socialized](#) to all different shapes and sizes of people. And we want them to be socialized so that they're not afraid, that they aren't seeking safety because they're physically afraid of what is a motorized scooter? What is a child on a bicycle?

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Socializing doesn't mean let the dog off leash and give them the freedom to play with every dog they see, to visit every human that they see. It means being appropriately allowed to visit with other dogs, allowed to visit with like safe puppies or safe other dogs, but also learning how to be by your side and watching those dogs and other people walk by and you don't get to visit with them.

So social needs. There are a lot of dogs that love playing with other dogs. My dog Momentum, who's 10 and a half loves playing with as many dogs as she can. Her daughter This! who's almost five, does not like playing with other dogs, but she loves chasing them outside and she loves being chased by them outside.

So, knowing what your dog's social needs are and don't force them to play with another dog if they don't want to play with another dog.

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Mental needs. Of course, that means education. That means enrichment. That means engagement. It means fanning the flame of curiosity.



Episode: #309

Behavior Is Communication: Decode Your Dog By Understanding Their 5 Core Needs

It means giving that dog autonomy in training, which means game-based training, cooperative care, [that the dog gets choice](#). Now it's still structured. It's not like we're letting them do whatever they want. It's 100% structured training, but the dog gets engaged by the opportunity to choose.

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The opportunity to earn reinforcement by the choices that they make. Enrichment comes in all forms, and training can be part of that, but enrichment can't be the same thing every day. I have done a [podcast episode on enrichment](#).

If you'd like me to do a deeper dive on that, jump over to YouTube and leave me a comment on this video. And I will be sure, because it's one of my favorite topics. Enrichment isn't the same thing every day.

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So, taking your dog for a walk to meet one of their physical needs. Is it better to let your dog walk on leash in different environments so they get a different walk every day? Or is it better that they [get off leash](#) in the same environment that's a safe fenced in area? I think that variety probably trumps getting off leash.

But the ideal is that the dog gets a nice physical run stretching their legs, off leash through trails or in fields or up and down. And I mean, I can't even give my dogs a different environment every day, but that would be the ideal. My dogs get off leash walks at least twice a day. Sometimes they get swimming mixed in there.

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They'll always get a little bit of training, but the training doesn't take the place of getting a walk because walking is meeting a need. It's allowing them to decompress. It's allowing them to read the pee mail. It's allowing them to chase another dog. There's just so much value in letting your dogs walk.

So, their mental needs can be met through the way you train, through the engagement and the enrichment. But it can't just be one thing. Now, the fifth category, which I called like daily thrive needs. And that's purpose structure and learning.

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So mental and the thrive needs so that dogs living in somebody's house aren't just surviving. They are thriving. They love structure, and I don't mean structure like "Don't touch that!" I mean structure like, "Hey, I know that when the doorbell rings, if I jump up here, I might earn a cookie." That structure.

So again, giving that dog clarity that they can consistently expect the same guidelines from you, the same structure from you. It's giving that dog purpose. So, you might see video clips of me playing games with my 14-and-a-half-year-old Border Collie.

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He loves to be engaged in games, and every single day he comes out to the training building with me. So, making that geriatric dog, feel special. It could be, this is where the value of teaching every dog on the planet a retrieve.

So, if you're super busy and you don't have time to do something with your old dog, just drop your slipper and say, "Hey buddy, can you bring me? I need that." And they bring it and they're so proud of themselves. They're 15, 16, 17, 18-year-old self. "I am helping you."



Episode: #309

Behavior Is Communication: Decode Your Dog By Understanding Their 5 Core Needs

00:15:57

Purpose, certainty, structure, learning, all of that would go under the daily thrive needs. And I think we can aim to get these five categories. The emotional, the physical, the social, the mental, and the daily thrive needs. We're maybe not gonna hit them all the time.

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But what we can do, we can look at this list that ChatGPT told me is the top 20 complaints of pet owners and we could say behavior is communication, behavior is not an indictment on the dog. Behavior is not rebellion by the dog.

Behavior is not the dog giving you the middle doggy digit. Behavior is not the dog expressing an opinion. Behavior is not the dog being defiant. Behavior is not a reason to punish. Behavior is a reason to listen. It's a reason to get curious. It's a reason to learn.

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And I think when every single dog owner on the planet can accept this fact, they could see like I do, that the previous solutions to overcoming unwanted behavior were nothing more than an expression of ego.

It was nothing more than a human that's carrying the baggage of their past traumas, dumping them on a poor defenseless dog. And once you can accept behavior is communication, you could then say, "Let me deep dive into those five categories of needs."

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And maybe the answer isn't obvious to me what need isn't being met. But when you look at those five categories, you can deep dive and say, "Can I do more in meeting my dog's daily thrive needs or emotional needs or social needs or mental needs?" Whatever it is, the communication is waiting there for all of us to listen more carefully. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources

[Podcast Episode 62: 12 Keys to Helping My Dogs Live a Long and Happy Life](#)

[Podcast Episode 8: Get Your Dog in the Belief Loop of Awesome](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Emotional Regulation in Dogs](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Feeding Dogs, Training Treats, Dog Food, Nutrition and Canine Behavior, Raw Diets](#)

[Podcast Episode 26: Pro Dog Training Tips to Get Your Puppy to Sleep All Night](#)

[YouTube Video: Susan Garrett's 5 Games for Puppies](#)

[YouTube Video: Puppy's First Training with Susan Garrett: Shaping, Targeting and Collar Conditioning](#)

[Podcast Episode 32: 20 Easy Ways to Exercise Your Dog at Home](#)

[Podcast Episode 246: Susan Garrett's Puppy Socialization Strategies For Raising Confident, Happy Dogs](#)

[Podcast Episode 106: Consent In Dog Training: The Misuse, Misunderstanding And Misapplication](#)

[Episode 286: Frustrated Puppy, Frustrated Human! Strategies For Wins With Puppy Raising](#)

[Podcast Episode 147: Teach Your Dog To Listen Off Leash And Far Away](#)



Episode: #309

Behavior Is Communication: Decode Your Dog By Understanding Their 5 Core Needs

About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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