# An Interview with Dr. Nicolas Dodman

by Claudia Kawczynska

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**Bark:** What is an animal behaviorist? What qualifies someone to be called a behaviorist?

**Dodman:** There are only two qualified types of behaviorists; one who is endorsed and certified by the Animal Behavior Society (ABS), the so-called certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (AB). And the veterinary ones, who are the diplomats of the American College of Veterinary Behavior. For the ABS the minimum starting point is a master's degree, but a lot of certified animal behaviorists have a Ph.D. That's the non-veterinary variety. In order to become a veterinary behaviorist, you have to do a vet degree first, taking four years after college, then one year internship and then the residency program that is normally three years long. In other words, it's another four years after the DVM that you become eligible to sit for the specialty examination in behavior. So after leaving high school, the ABS is a minimum of twelve years of study. And then you have to sit a pretty hard exam. These are the two types of people who are qualified animal behaviorists.

Having said that, the fact is, if you happen to have a dog that you trained yourself at home and you think you are pretty good at it, and you believe you have a gift, as some people do; there is nothing to stop you from proclaiming yourself to be a pet therapist, trainer or behaviorist. So the qualifications range from a non-professional-schooled person right the way up to a Ph.D. or DVM-board certified, so there is a tremendous range of people who call themselves behaviorists. I know some dog trainers who go out of their way to avoid being termed behaviorist, so if you ask, "Are you a behaviorist?" they say "no I am not a behaviorist, I am a trainer."

**Bark:** What do you feel is the place for punishment or negative re-enforcement in treating behavioral problems?

**Dodman:** I think that the direct punishment-based techniques are outmoded, a thing of the past, and should be avoided. Nobel Prize winners Lorenz, Tinbergen and Von Frisch might have disagreed on some points, but the three of them were all in agreement that punishment teaches a dog nothing. All it does is to teach a dog how to avoid the punishment. Which is not the same as teaching the dog what to do. There is no learning, other than learning avoidance of certain actions. You don't need punishment to teach either dogs or children. I don't believe in the concept of "sparing the rod and spoiling the child," or sparing the chain-jerking and spoiling the dog. All the techniques that we use in the clinic are 100 percent motivational—we do not use any coercive techniques. I work on the theory that if you can train a killer whale to launch itself out of a swimming pool, roll on its side and urinate into a small plastic cup, given only a whistle and a bucket of fish, without a choke chain, then you don't need those confrontational techniques with dogs.

As for those prong collars … I sometimes say to clients what John Lennon rudely said about Paul McCarthy—the only thing he did was "Yesterday." Prong collars are yesterday. There are some trainers, not all trainers, who just seem to know only one thing, and that is how to escalate punishment to reach the desired effect. So they start off with puppies the right way with food motivation. But as soon as the dog reaches a certain age, they go into a slip collar, then a metal choke collar, and if these aren't having the desired aversive effects, they escalate up to a prong collar; some even graduate higher, to electricity. What you have is a gradation of pain. And the pain is designed with the theory "you teach them to do something, and if they don't do it, you hurt them." Konrad Lorenz said that science and know-how aren't enough in dog training; patience is the vital stuff. I find that non-confrontational techniques are more appreciated by owners who often aren't of the disposition to want to hurt their animals to make them do anything.

**Bark:** I know that one of the big problems in training comes up in animal shelters, where some training is given to the dogs to make them more adoptable. Patience and non-aversive training are wonderful, but what can shelters workers do to make the animals adoptable, quickly?

**Dodman:** You could train fairly fast with clickers. In my office I use a clicker and food treats. I can have a dog at the beginning of a one-hour session without the faintest idea of what a clicker is, but at the end of the hour I do a click and he'll immediately come and sit for a food treat. They can learn what the clicker means fairly quickly. But in terms of rehabilitation of a dog in a shelter, I don't think that taking a dog that has gone through the kinds of unfortunate experiences that cause it to arrive in a shelter and then putting a choke chain and popping it a couple of times is going to sort it out. With a lot of the dogs I have seen in the behavior clinic, the relationship with the owner has broken down. Many of these dogs have been to training. They are top of the class. They are very smart. But they are willful or dysfunctional. They have problems that way, and these are the kinds of things that bring animals to shelters. You have dogs that are either relatively normal but untrained, or they are fearful, needing more confidence building. If you put a choke chain on a dog like that, you are going to drive it back in the middle of last week.

It all has to do with communication, too, it's not about having your dog respond like a little soldier to commands. It is just clear communication. I tell people to just imagine if they were in downtown Shanghai: everyone speaks Chinese and they don't have the faintest idea of what is going on. That's a pretty stressful situation to be in. But if someone comes up with just a few basic words—like restaurant, bathroom, transportation—just a few words sprinkled in, that could really mean something and could help with de-stressing the situation. I see communication as being one of the three Rs of rehabilitation for a dog that has gone off the rails. The other two Rs are exercise and appropriate diet. I call that the Reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic of dog rehabilitation. If you are dog, you pronounce that with a rrruhrrr.

**Bark:** What do you think is the single most important preventative measure people can take to help avoid behavior problems in their pets?

**Dodman:** That's a difficult question, because there are several factors, such as exercise, diet, communication, suitable restraints and fenced-in yards and perhaps providing a crate, even if you don't ever shut the door. Put as the one single thing? Probably it would be to provide leadership. The dog is a territorial animal and when he moves into your territory, he'll try to take it over; if you feed him, he might keep you on because you are feeding him. So it is very important to provide clear leadership in a non-confrontational way.

I think that dogs and children are a very similar. For example, there was a study done by a masters degree graduate student at Tufts. She took dogs on the basis of puppy temperament testing who were likely to become a bit extroverted, a little dominant. And she said three simple things to their owners—she had two groups so she did it all scientifically—one group of owners were told, "Have a nice day," and the other group was told, "Number one, make your puppy sit in order to get fed; number two, make your little puppy sit to get food treats; and, number three, provide the puppy with a crate. (You don't have to put the dog in there twenty-three hours a day, you can even leave the door open. Make it a safe place for the dog to go to.)" With these three measures none of the dogs in the second group became dominant or gave the owners any trouble. Nearly all the dogs in the first group turned out to be dominant and got into the territorial mode of guarding their property and possessions within their territory. So I think that leadership is very important because of the pack mentality of dogs. If you are the leader, I don't think that the dog is unhappy about having you as the leader. And when the owner takes clear control through a non-confrontational dominance program, you can almost hear the dog sigh with relief. It's as if they are saying, "My god, for a minute I thought it was me who was in charge here." It's a relief. They don't feel miserable. They are not like humans who have to be number one. They don't care about being at the top of the hierarchy, they just need to know where they are in it. Clearly know .

**Bark:** In your books you talk about the importance of aerobic exercise for the health of a dog. How can dog owners provide that kind of exercise for their dogs at the end of leash?

**Dodman:** The vast majority of dogs do benefit greatly from having exercise periods. And walking dogs on a leash is not sufficient exercise. It's not that they die if they walk on a leash, just as it's not that a human being dies in solitary confinement either. It is just that it is not optimal for their physiological and psychological well-being. Exercise is good for us and it is good for a dog. People say to me, "I give my dog a lot of exercise, I take him for a walk around the block every day and it is about a mile or a mile and a half." I say, "Well, I take my eighty-four-year-old mother for a mile walk around the block, but that doesn't constitute exercise." We really need to get heart rate to a certain level, and this is done by running off-lead. Then again, there is another side to the dogs-in-parks issue, and this is where you find people coming out stacked high on both sides. There's responsible pet ownership. But it is the irresponsible behavior of the few that has made society make rules that are punitive for the many responsible owners. So it is not appropriate to walk along Fifth Avenue with your dog off leash—even if you happen to have a dog trained to heel, all it takes is a rollerblader coming down the street and the dog might run after him

or the dog might decide to cross the road because there is a bitch in heat. On crowded streets you need to keep a dog on lead, and people need to be responsible for picking up their dog's waste; and if you know that your dog has a weakness for, say, attacking small dogs, that is another thing that you should control. The only way you can control it is physically. But that doesn't mean that you have to forego aerobic exercise. It is the owner's duty to find a place where they can let their dog off leash to run, safely.

I know how difficult it is when you live inside a huge sprawling urban complex, such as a city like Boston. Tufts is north of Boston in Medford and they have the same issues. All the dog people from the north shore of Boston were using the university playing fields to exercise their dogs. They were all congregating on the only green area. The football players were running around and skidding in dog muck. So they put a little fence around a little area in the corner, so now all the dog people are condensed into that small area. This is a difficult situation—the dog owners have nowhere else to go, but the players shouldn't have to roll around in the dog doo either. I think there should be certain areas where dogs are permitted to do whatever they want to do, to run. I sometimes tell people if they are in a really difficult situation, though this is somewhat illicit, if worse comes to worst, take their dogs to a tennis court—wing a ball to them and they'll run backwards and forwards.

So whether it's continued petitioning to provide parks for dog owners, these things are necessary, considering how many dogs there are in the country. There are something like half as many dogs as there are cars. If you told car owners they could not park on the streets, what would they do? So there is this massive problem. One in five people owns a dog, something like 40 percent of all American households have a pet. And to make a rule that people can't exercise their dogs off leash might even be one of the reasons that we are seeing an increase in problems these days. The demographics of the human population is such that people are moving into the inner cities, we are becoming a nation of city dwellers, and in the city it is a concrete jungle, as Desmond Morris would say. Life is very bizarre for dogs who live in Manhattan. It is not at all like the natural life. A dog needs to be provided with natural outlets—being able to run and exercise and chase things and do what dogs were bred to do. Say you have an apartment-dwelling dog who has little or no exercise and is fed one of these high-energy foods. Then add to that that there isn't much communication because the owner took the dog to obedience training as a puppy and doesn't do it anymore. So now you have a dog that neither is communicated with properly, nor has appropriate outlets or diet. This situation, which is all too common, is an accident looking for a place to happen.

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