

Whelping and Weaning: New Thoughts on an Ancient Process

Whelping: To give birth to Weaning: To detach from Mom's milk bags

My relationship with dogs began about eighteen years ago. Of course, my family had dogs all my life, but I can't really say that I had a relationship with them. It wasn't until I acquired my first dog as an adult that the dance really started. Shortly after that first dog came into my life I became hooked on learning and teaching dogs as much as I could.

In the beginning I was taught to use force to train my dogs! While this method worked, it was a far cry from the working relationship that I craved. I competed in Obedience and taught pet classes. I also began a long career training Assistance Dogs.

Then nine years ago I found Chris Bach and THE THIRD WAY of dog training. This method took the word force out of my vocabulary and gave me the relationship that I wanted with my dogs.

About that same time I began breeding Jack Russell Terriers. Here was a breed that had a reputation for being "independent, naturally aggressive, not good with children, and cat killers"! With my introduction to THE THIRD WAY came the knowledge that these were myths, or what we now call Urban Legends. While the dogs that I found here in the US were not of the temperament that I wanted to live with, I did find what I was looking for in England. What I didn't realize at the time was that it was not just genetics that produced the great temperaments. The dynamics of how they were raised from birth to the time they went to their new homes had a major impact on the puppies' ability to interact with humans and other animals. This was made apparent after Chris asked me to raise my last litter in a different manner than I had with previous litters.

Chris had a theory that breeder interference, while well intentioned, was actually creating many of the problems that we see in puppy classes and in adult dogs brought to us with problems.

In puppy and adult classes we see so many puppies and adults who have no knowledge of "self-imposed self-control", little or no bite inhibition, very poor dog-to-dog social skills, an inability to accurately read other dogs' signals and body language, and little regard for personal space, (theirs or ours).

It is common practice for breeders to remove the bitch from the litter at about four weeks, allowing limited access to the puppies. In some cases the bitch is removed permanently once solid food is introduced. The belief being that most social behaviors are learned from littermates. As a result of this belief, breeders generally keep a litter together until they are eight to twelve weeks old, in the hopes that this will give the puppies the opportunity to learn bite inhibition, and social skills from each other. We believe that littermates are not necessarily the best instructors.

In our past litters there always came a time when the puppies would begin to nip at our chins, bite our fingers, grab and hold onto an earlobe, and use pant legs as a tug-of-war toy. In general they used their mouths inappropriately. They would approach any dog as if that dog were their long lost buddy, never looking for the signs that they were welcome, just assuming they were. These puppies had to be taught self-imposed self-control, in other words they had to be taught that there are times when things are not available to them and that they should go on to something else.

Chris' theory is that; by not allowing the mother to wean the litter on her own, we remove the puppy's opportunity to learn some of the skills necessary to live harmoniously with their new human families. Her theory maintains that by allowing the bitch to wean the puppies naturally, the puppies learn these crucial skills from her. She asked us if we would raise our last litter in this manner and document any differences we saw between this litter and the past fifteen litters we raised. Here is what we found.

The Differences

We have always been very involved with our litters. They are raised in the family room and kitchen, in the midst of the household. They are handled, held, and cuddled from the day they are born. The prospective families are encouraged to visit right from the start as we feel that the puppies need to be exposed to many different smells and touches, even before their eyes and ears are functioning. Visitors are encouraged from the day the puppies are born.

With past litters, once the puppies began to experiment with solid food we would begin to separate the bitch from the litter for varying periods of time, lengthening the time as the pups aged. Eventually separating them permanently so that the bitch's milk would dry up. This usually began at about four weeks. The one constant we observed was; when we returned the bitch after any separation, whether it was for a couple of hours or over night, the response was always the same. The puppies mobbed the bitch! We also fed the bitch and the puppies separately.

With this litter the bitch had constant access to the puppies, we adapted the whelping box so that she was able get in and out, but the puppies could not. Self-preservation on my part! While it might be even more advantageous to integrate the puppies into the whole household, I do have a husband that I would like to keep! While she often took advantage of the opportunity to leave the puppies to go outside or to socialize with us, she still spent the majority of her time in the box with the puppies, often sleeping on one side while the puppies slept on the other. This continued until the last puppy went home. We would also have the puppies out in the fenced yard with the bitch as much as possible.

Solid food is also provided when the family is together. The bitch is fed right along with the puppies. We make sure that there is dry kibble available at all times. In the beginning we feed kibble soaked in warm water, making sure that there is enough for both the bitch and the puppies. If I have a puppy that tends to be pushy and hog all the food I separate that puppy out and feed the puppy just with the bitch, she tends to not allow this type of behavior. I will continue to do this

until the puppy is no longer exhibiting these behaviors. This is the only time I interfered with the feeding routine.

The first difference I observed was that there were many times when the puppies would wish to nurse and the bitch would tell them that she was not available to them. She used the minimum amount of negative feedback necessary to deter the puppy. Some puppies were very sensitive; others were a little more persistent. As a result, the puppies were not only learning self-imposed, self-control, they were also learning how to approach the bitch and how to read her signals indicating when she was available and when she was not. After the first few attempts, the puppies became extremely adept at reading even the subtlest signals from the bitch. Sometimes I was unaware of the signal the bitch gave that turned the puppy away.

As they aged and their teeth became sharper and more damaging, the bitch would inform the puppy of what was too harsh, therefore teaching the puppy bite inhibition. I noticed that mouthing was generally not allowed. The puppies were informed that pulling on ears and biting back legs were not a good idea. I also observed that they were gentler with their littermates as well. The bitch played with the puppies regularly, she just set the rules.

We, as humans, make poor dogs. Our attempts to replicate what the bitch teaches the puppies are generally inadequate. Our timing is poor and our emotions get in the way. Leaving this task to the bitch makes our job as teachers much easier. A professional has already laid the ground rules.

In regards to human interaction I found these puppies to be vastly different from past litters. They did not mouth as much as previous litters. They tended to be more patient and more able to focus their attention and relinquish unavailable resources. In other words, they understood "Self-imposed Self-control".

The most dramatic difference was when we introduced them to the other adult dogs in our family and subsequently other new dogs. These puppies were much more educated in how to approach a strange dog. Rather than just running up to the dog and assuming that their attention was wanted, the puppy would approach the dog, accurately read that particular dog and react accordingly. Depending on the signals given, the puppy would respond by turning away and looking for facilitation elsewhere or, continuing to approach and interact with the unfamiliar dog.

One trait that seemed to be common with our puppies was a phase where, when you picked them up, especially while they were busy doing something else, they would protest, usually a growl. I did not have a situation where this occurred with this litter.

Once the puppy was placed with their new family the differences continued to become apparent. This was the first litter where I did not have at least one new owner calling with a problem involving mouthing, clothes grabbing, and excessive chewing. I have been able to follow this litter and can still observe the results of this experiment. They have retained the social skills in regards to their interaction with strange dogs. They are wonderful with other puppies and

boisterous adolescents, neither overly tolerant nor intolerant. What I would describe as being "fair".

I also came to the realization that this particular bitch, Hattie, was raised in a similar fashion. She was whelped on a sheep farm where they hold the National Sheepdog trials every year in England. They raised an occasional JRT (Jack Russell Terrier) litter for their own use. The JRT's job was vermin control. Hattie's great-grandmother was 22 years old when we purchased Hattie. Their mother raised the litter, with no human interference in the process. That is not to say they were not socialized! They were very well socialized by the family, the farm hands and the neighbor children, as well as the other dogs and animals on the farm. I finally figured out why a friend had dubbed Hattie as the "Jack Russell Antichrist", in his words, "she was way too sweet to be a Jack Russell". She has all the traits that this last litter of puppies has and I have to attribute much of that to allowing her mother to do her job and raise the puppies with support from us not interfering!

There are other breeders of different breeds that are conducting the same experiment. It is my hope that I can bring you further evidence that this natural, ancient process can have a profound effect on the puppies that we produce.

Not every bitch will have these same abilities and it is up to us to choose the bitches that are good nurturers. Eliminating bitches that do not exhibit these qualities from our breeding programs will only improve a breeding program by passing down the ability to effectively raise puppies. Providing these puppies the necessary tools and having those puppies able to enter their new life with these abilities already in place, is a wonderful gift that we can give the new owners.

I encourage breeders to join this experiment. I would appreciate the opportunity to evaluate this theory and would ask breeders to share their results with me so that I can compile the results.

If you are a dog breeder and you are interested in whelping puppies by using this method, contact Jodi Binstead of Animal Behavior Consulting at: (616) 942-9588. For more information on Jodi's training services, visit her website at: www.trainpositively.com

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