More Fun Facts About Behavior

Shyness has the highest heritability factor of all behaviors. Eye and hair color are examples of heritable traits. Religion would be an example of a non-heritable trait in people. Fear of unfamiliar things is an adaptive trait in the wild, and it is also a dominant gene, so it is difficult to get rid of by breeding. Shyness is responsible for a large percentage of dog bites.

Dominance - the tendency to strive for high social rank in the pack - is also highly heritable. So is agonistic behavior - aggressive behavior towards other dogs. The propensity to bite, in other words, is inheritable, and explains why some breeds are more likely to bite at the same level of aggression. The location of the bite is also breed related, and thus genetic. Cockers, springers and shepherds are likely to bite the hands and arms. Dachshunds go for the face, heelers the legs and huskies the torso. This is why it is so important to research the breed and the parents of any puppy you might be thinking of purchasing!

Socialization begins in the womb. Stress in the mother during her pregnancy leads to changes in hormone levels, which leads to changes in the puppies. This is probably true for cats as well.

Varied and complex early environments lead to increased brain development. Pet shop or puppy mill puppies or kittens often have a lack of neurological development as a direct result of lack of stimulus. Breeders should expose puppies and kittens to varied stimuli - different people, floor surfaces, noises, etc. The critical period for this is 5-7 weeks of age, before many new owners acquire their pets.

Research shows that in kittens, 3-7 weeks is the critical period. The greater the number of people the kitten interacts with at this stage, the more social it will be with strangers. It will also seek more attention from the owners and will be much more likely to be a "lap cat".

Stress means change. Stress can be positive or negative. Animals need a certain amount of stress and change to adapt and grow. Increased environmental stimulus leads to increased ability to handle stress and change.

Leaning backwards is a submissive response in dogs. Leaning forward is dominant. Be careful of your posture and what it is saying to dogs. Notice when a dog is growling or barking at you whether his weight is on the front or back legs. This is a clue as to whether the aggression he exhibits is dominance or fear related.

Showing teeth with the commissure (corner) of the mouth pulled back indicates fear/submissiveness. Teeth bared with the commissure pulled forward is aggressive. The fear grimace is especially easy to see in German shepherds. People are afraid of their exposed teeth, but the dog is exhibiting fear behavior.

Some friendly dogs will show their teeth in a "smile" gesture. With "smiling" the teeth are showing but the head will be lower, the ears are down and the dog is often body wagging. This is not an aggressive or dominant gesture.

Tail wagging is very ambivalent. Just because the tail is wagging doesn't mean the dog won't bite you! The smaller the wag, the more likely the dog is to bite. If the whole butt is wagging, you're usually safe!

Pupil dilation may indicate fear, phobia - or ambient light conditions. Watch for a pupil dilation flare that goes away quickly in bright light. Large pupils mean more adrenaline in the system, and a lower threshold to panic or bite.

Posture (weight forward or back), ear position (up is interested or aggressive, down is submissive) and tail position all give signals to the dog's mood and aggressiveness.

An easy test of dominance if you are having trouble reading the dog's signals is to pick up the back foot of the dog. If he growls, struggles or lunges, watch out! A dominant-aggressive dog will not usually tolerate messing with the back foot. Watch for the eyes to go cold, the pupils to dilate or the lip to curl. This is what makes nail trimming dangerous!

Injury to humans is 5-9 times more likely from male dogs, intact OR neutered. Early exposure to sex hormones in the uterus may be more important to aggression than the testicular hormones which begin circulating after puberty. Neutering may help, but is not the whole story.

Alpha members of a wolf or wild dog pack are the dominant members of the pack. Only the dominant male and female of a pack breed. Other pack members are far below alpha members in status, and are called Betas.

In a human and dog household the goal is for all dogs to be equal Beta members. Humans should always be Alphas.

Scruff shakes are used in fights between pack members equal in rank. Grabbing a dog's scruff or collar is a very aggressive gesture which to the dog means "I want to kill you". It does not tell the dog you are dominant, but rather that you are his equal in rank, and it's OK to fight back. Most people who are bitten trying to break up a dog fight or pull an aggressive dog back from a stranger do so when they grab the dog's collar.

A direct stare is also a threat gesture to a dog. If you don't know whether a dog is naughty or nice, don't stare at him, as it will make him more likely to become aggressive. A submissive dog will usually look away when stared down.

Non-dominant dogs are not protective. Alpha members of the pack are responsible for territorial protection. Therefore, overprotective or territorial dogs are dominant. If your dog aggressively defends you or his territory, you may have a big liability problem waiting to happen! Take steps to decrease dominance - neutering, conditioning to decrease status, obedience training, etc. Otherwise your pet may someday injure a person or another pet he perceives as a threat to "his" territory - like his veterinarian or your neighbor's child.

Growling over food, toys, bed, etc. is status related aggression. Also dominant. If your dog growls at you, he thinks he is superior to you. Your dog should not rule your house!

Puppies less than 14 weeks old who growl warrant serious attention. They have very dominant tendancies, and without exceptionally good training may grow up to have serious behavior problems.