

Understanding Your Dog's Behavior Part II:

A Special Interview with Dr. Isla Fishburn

By Dr. Karen Becker

KB: Dr. Karen Becker

IF: Dr. Isla Fishburn

KB: Right. Along that same vein, do you... I know, because you mentioned while you were lecturing, how you feed your dogs. It's fascinating, in the sense that you're a big believer in choices, choices for everyone. Everyone deserves choices, including the animals that we're tending to or caring for. Those prey species that we're feeding also deserve choices.

All that to say, from your expertise of working with wild wolves, you've recognized that animals do make very individual choices within their bodies for what they physiologically need. You kind of are emulating that in your own feeding style. One of the stories you told was that you have baskets. You have different fruits and vegetables, different bones, seeds, and nuts that your dogs are able to forage on, and that they'll specifically forage.

Tell us a little bit more about that, because I think it's very empowering to guardians who are looking to do their very best for their animals. I think oftentimes we don't have other choices. Talk a little bit about feeding domestic animals pertaining to choices.

IF: Cool. I'm pretty much obsessed with dogs having choices, because again, dogs as domestic animals really have a hard time. Horses, often do as well, but kind of at least at some point put back in the field and at least hopefully they have a wide enough field where they can forage, roam, and at least make a decision of their own. Do I want to lie? Do I want to graze? What do I want to do? The dogs are kind of controlled so much. When they're out on a walk or they're back at the house, a lot of dogs are told, "Don't lie there. Don't do this. Don't do that." I just love watching dogs having that freedom.

I feed my dogs differently based on identity. It's a little group composition. I love group composition. It's absolutely a thing that I'm big into as a zoologist. It's really, really important for our dogs. But one of the things I do as well is, just like you say... My dogs are going to vary on their diet based on their nutritional need. They have different needs that ought to do with identity, personality. It's known as functional character, but also depending on ambient temperature, their physiology, if they maybe have picked up bacteria, or something, that's going to change their choice of diet.

What I offer to my dogs is I have this big wicker basket. It's in our kitchen. That is full of sweet potatoes, butternut squash, melon, broccoli, cauliflower, plums, and pears. There are no nuts in there. I have a separate container for nuts, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds. That wicker basket is there all day long, for months on end, for weeks on end. It's filled with vegetables. We could also use those vegetables ourselves for cooking.

Now, weeks and months can pass and our dogs not eating those apples, butternut squash, or any of those fruits and vegetables. Then a day can arise when they just can't get enough. They can't enough butternut squash. I want to say, "There, I just made one individual." It might be my dog Priscilla. She might just want loads of butternut squash. My other dog, he wants loads of apples and pears on a particular day.

When we come to nuts and seeds, they really, really vary when they want it and when they don't. They're very, very selective in what they want. You can see, just offer to them and they'll go, "Yeah, I want it," or "No, I don't." It's very liberating for them. That's what they would do if they have that choice. I think it's important. They're in a house, but they have that choice as well if you need it.

KB: It's interesting, because a lot of people who are feeding fresh food diets believe in rotation. We're all about balance over time. We're doing this great variety. But you have a really interesting topic during your lecture where sometimes you're putting things in a bowl. Some of us are a little obsessive for feeding 20 different meats and all of these different options, but dogs will specifically eat around that one certain thing.

As veterinarians, we tend to be control freaks and say, "Oh, my gosh, you've got to take this supplement. You've got to take this herb. You have to take this specific homeopathic." You really have made your focus on asking if the animal wants to eat that, asking if the animal wants that medication. Let's talk a little bit about that now developing field of giving animals choices and not just self-medicating with foods, but self-medicating in general.

What was your introduction to allowing animals, empowering animals to make their own decisions about what they choose to not only nourish their body with but to heal their body?

IF: As a zoologist, I'm just so kind of obsessed, I guess, at looking at what can nature tell us to apply this to our dogs? I keep going back to that. Dogs are domesticated, but for me, there is too much emphasis on that word. We still have to look at what that dog is – its evolution, its natural history, its biology, and its role as a canine, as an animal, as a species. I'm really, really big into giving our dogs choices.

I found a method, an approach, a technique called Applied Zoopharmacognosy. This isn't mine. This is the amazing Caroline Ingraham's, who's my teacher. I'm a student of hers. Applied Zoopharmacognosy, there were loads of papers on it, from anything insects to mammals, about animals having knowledge about health. An animal wants to feel well. An animal wants to align with their natural selves. They want to feel good.

Wild animals have this ability to forage and seek. Kind of, from a very, very cellular level, their body communicates to itself about, "At this moment in time, this is what I need for my health." It's this kind of practice that we can apply to our domestic animals. It's not just for dogs. I just know about canines maybe, so I just do it on canines. But it's offering a variety of remedies – powders, algae, clays, and essential oils – to give to an animal that might have a particular health concern, a particular nutritional concern.

I'm doing it with dogs that have got cancer, skin problems, atopic dermatitis, stomach upset, lacking in a particular nutrient, or have behavioral issue. I have a really, really serious case where a dog really didn't want strangers into the house. We worked with that dog and found a remedy that really helps deal with trauma. This dog had an awful lot of trauma to the point of... When we worked with that remedy, the dog now allows strangers into the house. It's a really, really powerful tool.

Again, it gives that choice back to the dog, which is so important, because dogs really, really have a hard time. A lot of the animals do, but dogs really, really do. It's just kind of so empowering for that animal. That's what I want to do. I want to empower that dog to say, "You take control. You tell me what it is you need, and I will provide that for you."

KB: That is almost 180 degree different from traditional, even ultra-positive training techniques. It's about the trainer helping to train the dog and not necessarily asking the dog what it needs to improve its behavior, whether that's an herb, a supplement, a dietary change, or obviously a huge environmental

change. But really, your approach is taking it more from a dog's standpoint as to what can we do to help you, looking at a dog in its own environment, and determining what the issue is.

Dr. Fishburn, I know you primarily are working with behavior – I don't want to say problems – issues most of the time. Are you seeing some patterns? Are you capable of listing the top several things that you're seeing that we could potentially change or do to avoid some of these pitfalls? Do you have some top suggestions that you find yourself repeating over and over, which maybe we all need to be thinking about but aren't?

IF: I do a lot of talks, I give a lot of courses, and I speak to a lot of people. The biggest thing that is so simple but people kind of step back and go, "Oh, yeah?" is safety. The fundamental priority of any animal – humans, dogs, elephants, or any animal – is they want to feel safe, because safety maximizes their survival. Any animal wants to survive.

I really spend a lot of time focusing on safety and what it means. But also how if an animal doesn't feel safe, of course, how that's going to change its emotional state, which, of course, is going to change its behavior. That's kind of really what I focus on. I want that animal to feel peaceful. I want that animal to feel safe, which is then going to have a knock-on effect on that animal feeling calm. It's going to feel loved. We're going to help the dog with whatever behavioral issue it's feeling at that time.

Now, sometimes it's really hard. Sometimes, if it's an environmental thing, the dog is in the wrong environment, not because its human guardian (I don't really like to use the word "owner"; it's human guardian for me). They haven't done anything wrong. It's just that maybe the dog can't be in a bit of a city environment, because of its unique character, its personality. It needs some place quiet.

If they've done everything they can, they've read all the right books, and they have done everything right in their eyes, it's just the environment. For me, you really have to look at the cause of behavior or the list of causes of behavior. We'll account which may be relevant, which may be aren't relevant, but then fundamentally go back to safety. How is this animal feeling?

KB: You do a lot of speaking and lecturing, Isla. Talk to me about what your most popular request is. What do people want to know you're lecturing on? What are some of the topics you cover? What are people asking for?

IF: That's such an interesting question. I think a lot of people, they don't quite know what I teach. I really teach a series of courses and topics that are called Listen to Your Dog to Learn, Love, and Live with Your Dog. It's really all about empowering that animal, empowering that dog.

We really focus everything from the cellular level upwards, because people kind of don't realize that everything happens at a cellular level. All these cells kind of grow and grow to build your whole organisms. That's why everything is interrelated. It's really important to understand that. That's kind of what I focus on.

For me, it really is getting people to listen to that dog. For me, everything's about coexistence. I want to maximize my well-being, which means I want to improve, optimize my dog's well-being potential as well. In order to do that, I need to listen to my dog.

KB: Yes.

IF: If I want my dog to feel loved, then I have to understand that I can express that love to my dog to maximize that dog's well-being. If I want to learn or when I have a dog, yes, okay, we have to teach the dog things, which is keeping our dogs safe. But equally when we have any dog we also live from the dog

ourselves. We learn an awful lot about our self as a character, about dogs in general, or any dog I would come across.

Then finally, living, when we live with a dog, it's a lot about coexistence. For me, if we want to maximize the well-being potential of our dog, with all these things, we have to listen. We have to focus on making sure our dogs are in alignment with their natural selves. That's kind of what I focus on. But within that, it's all competition.

They have all these different cause behaviors. As some would quite well know although this might be quite not so well known, I have huge emphasis on trauma. I love trauma. The three main things that I love looking at are diet, and how diet and scent are related. I love looking at trauma. I love looking at identity as well.

Now one of the things that I focus on is something called surrounding family dynamics, which really is who does the dog live with in terms of in the house, but also other human parties, the other humans that the humans of the dog live with. This is really, really important, because again dogs are social group animals. They include us – their interaction, their emotions, how their feeling, and including how we're feeling as well.

The example that I give is, say, there's a man who has a dog. It's just him and the dog. The man just clearly hates his job. My dogs sleep upstairs. Everybody likes that. I've got reason for why my dogs sleep upstairs. It's a really cool, lovely bonding and interactive coexistence. But hey, that's just what I like to do.

In this example, in this hypothetical situation, the man sleeps upstairs, the dog sleeps downstairs. He gets up on the morning. He's really despondent like, "Ugh, I'll go to work. I hate my job." The dog's tail is already going, because the dog has heard his human guardian is up. He's about, "When is he going to come downstairs?" He's really excited. He really anticipates for his human guardian to come downstairs. The man he comes downstairs really slowly. He goes, "All right, son. I got to go to work. Have a good day. See you later." He leaves the house. The dog sees this man leave the house very, very despondent.

The man comes back. The human guardian comes back. The dog gets really excited. That tail's going, "He's coming. He's coming. I haven't seen him all day. I'm so excited." The man got a hellish day at work. He's angry. He's annoyed. He's frustrated. Again, the dog has seen this man coming through the doorway. The man goes, "I really need to diffuse. I really just need to chill out before I think about going back to work the next day." The dog leaves.

Then he goes, "Come, Winston. Let's go for a walk." One of a few things can happen. One dog might go, "I'm not going out there." Another dog might go, "Come on. Let's go out there. I'll show aggressive behavior, I'll be reactive when I go out. I'll blow." Because the dog is picking up on the emotional state of that man, the connection the dog sees is when you go out that doorway, there's a problem.

Some dogs might be naturally fearful anyway. They might be nervous. Some dogs go, "I'm a bit scared going out there, because you told me there's a problem." Other dogs feel like they're protectors. They're strong. They're confident. They want to protect the rest of the family. They're big and strong, and they look out for size that they think is a problem. For me, that's a major thing that we need to focus on. We actually need to focus on how do we feel? Because dogs really, really focus on that.

Another thing that I really love looking at is the identity of the dog, because this is really important to understand when we look at a dog's well-being, when we look at a dog's diet, and when we look at why is every dog different. This is why I say there's no such thing as a textbook dog. We can't expect every dog to perform at the same level as any other dog, because that is not natural. Not everything can be the same.

There's a late wolf biologist called Dr. Gordon Haber, and he termed the wolves that live in a group (although, of course, they're living as a family), as having functional characters. They have a function. They have a purpose that allows them to support one another as a unit. I am absolutely certain that dogs, to this day, still have it. For me, that's really important. It's a massive thing to look at when we look at group composition. Why some dogs still get on while some dogs don't? Because competition is just a natural ecological feature. It's just something that happens.

That's why we have some dogs that are very independent, very aloof. They have a much smaller social network. Their interaction is very, very different. Their reaction when we're teaching them something is very, very different. Compared to a dog that might be... A dog is very, very responsive and isn't really a trouble maker. There might be another dog that is really shy, nervous, and suspicious, even though it had a great mother, even though its human guardian has got everything right for that dog's socializing, because it's the natural functional character of that dog.

This is something that I really, really focus on, because it really helps me explain and understand the dog's behavior. Now, of course, as humans, all else is being equal. That's why when we look at dog behaviors, we really need to look at everything else. It's a big umbrella effect of behavior itself.

KB: Isla, you're covering topics, ideas, and viewpoints that traditional healthy positive dog trainer doesn't cover. Part of it is I think your focus is on biology as well as the emotional and mental compartment that a lot of traditional behaviorists aren't. It just really is fascinating.

We're really excited to learn more about the topics that you're going to be covering as well as all that you're doing. What you're providing in terms of that missing piece when it comes to training and understanding your dog's behavior, understanding problems that could arise and providing some fresh new insights that we're all really excited to continue to learn about. Thank you, Dr. Fishburn, for joining us.

IF: Thank you very much for having me. It was great to be here. Thank you.

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