Understanding dogs while working in the field – putting the theory into practice

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Animal management and welfare work, including human support roles in which human service providers interact with pet animals, presents an inherent risk of injury or illness from those animals. While our aim is always to simply get the job done as quickly and efficiently as possible, we also need to remember (and prioritise!) our responsibilities to keep everyone safe and complete the task with a minimum amount of stress for all involved – these last two points are inherently linked!

However, when we work with dogs in these kinds of roles, several factors may negatively influence our ability to keep everyone safe while getting the job done. These include, but are not limited to:

- High stress environments (e.g. shelters, public environments for loose dogs, within people’s homes when owners may be distressed)
- Limited time – we are there to get a job done!
- Limited space – kennel runs, vehicle compartments, entranceways at people’s homes
- High density of animals – shelter specific, but can influence behaviour in transport vehicles too

Handling and training dogs takes a lot of skill, even when we are working with known animals and our own pets. Working with dogs in high-stress, time-poor environments means that you must be an excellent dog handler to do your job well.

Dog handling skills are 80% accurate observation and understanding, 15% practicing clear and effective body language to communicate with the dog, and 5% knowing fancy moves that will keep you out of trouble when the poop hits the fan (which should not be often if you are doing the other 95% well).

This handout will specifically focus on several concepts within the world of animal (and human!) behaviour that are important to understand what aggression is, why animals use it, and how to influence the likelihood of being on the receiving end of an aggressive response.

**Aggression basics**

Often when we are talking about keeping safe around dogs, the conversation focuses on aggression. Afterall, this is the most likely way you are going to be seriously injured by a dog!

Put simply, aggression is behaviour that:

- Creates distance from or reduces perceived threat
- Is intended to avoid high cost interactions that may reduce the dog’s health (for non-pathological aggression)
- Is associated with negative affective state (unpleasant emotions)
- Is typically, but not always, associated with a high arousal level
Not all aggression is created equal. A person pointing a gun at your head is not equivalent to a person threatening to punch you in the arm, and behaviourally healthy people respond differently to these two situations – it’s the same with dogs!

None of the dogs in these photos are intent on doing significant harm to anyone, even though two of them are actively using their mouths to communicate and two more are being obnoxiously noisy!

Of course, a large part of working out whether you are facing a gunfight or a punch in the arm is simply understanding what the dog in front of you is trying to say. In addition to the webinar accompanying this handout (which is available to view on the Justice Clearing House website), there are some excellent resources available to help you better understand dog body language:

- ASPCA Pro Canine Communication and Behaviour Series and Learning Labs
- Trish and Mike’s Defensive Handling and Training 2-day seminar
- Trish’s 6-month Shelter Dog Behaviour Mentorship
- Mike Shikashio’s Aggressivedog.com resource library and YouTube playlist
- Brenda Aloff’s book, Canine Body Language: A Photographic guide
- YouTube or your local dog park!! Nothing beats practice when it comes to accurately observing dog behaviour.

**Arousal**

Put simply, arousal is simply how physically and psychologically ready the body is to do something. At the lowest levels of arousal, an animal is in a coma and unaware of anything going on around them while at the other extreme is panic.

In conscious animals, arousal occurs on a spectrum, from deep sleep (left), through relaxed wakefulness (middle) to manic behaviour, like over-tired puppy zoomies (right)
Arousal itself does not have an emotion – you can be aroused and happy (i.e. excited), aroused and sad (e.g. distraught), aroused and angry (e.g. rage-filled) or aroused and fearful (e.g. anxious). In all cases, your body’s readiness to do something is separate to and controlled by what you are thinking and how you are feeling.

Even though the way an animal is feeling and therefore behaving can change independently of their state of arousal, as arousal increases an animal’s brain responds in a predictable way. These changes include:

- Heightens ‘base’ emotion (i.e. emotion is felt more strongly, and animal behaves more obviously)
- Increases awareness of external stimuli but decreases field of focus (i.e. they notice more details about fewer things in the environment)
- Increases ability to physically react (i.e. they react more quickly)
- Decreases ability to think and increases impulsivity (i.e. they respond without thinking)
- Results in emotional ‘flipping’ (i.e. animal swings quickly between emotional states, like excitement and anger)

These changes are important for you when you are working with a dog experiencing a sharp increase in arousal. A dog who is heavily focusing on you and reacting quickly while experiencing strong emotions is a dog that is much more likely to use his teeth to make his point!

As arousal is a physical and physiological process, you can see the effects of it on an animal’s body with your eyes. The key things to look for when assessing an animal’s state of arousal are:

- Increased muscle tension and skin tone – this shows up as increased muscle definition, jerky and tense movement, and hackles
- Increased respiratory rate - panting
- Pupil dilation – this is particularly noticeable under artificial light
- Sweating and hypersalivation – sweaty paws and drooling
- Intense focus – staring intently at one person, animal, or thing

When an animal is displaying multiple physical signs of high arousal, or their arousal level is rapidly increasing, you should note this and work hard to calm the situation down – give the animal some space, slow down your own breathing and movement, soften your posture, and make sure you are using long, low tones when you speak.

Because we are usually dealing with animals in situations where they perceive us as a threat, increasing arousal means they are more likely to do ‘something’ to get out of the situation they are in - most pet dogs use aggression as a last resort to deal with a threat, so clearly give them other options.

Key point when working with stressed animals - look out for signs of increasing arousal and do what you can to slow or reverse that process – de-escalate first!
Threat response and coping strategies

Arousal is how the body prepares itself to act, and an animal’s typical response to a threat – called their coping strategy – tells up what they are likely to do when they do act. The coping strategy framework is the basis for the flight/fight/freeze idea of defensive behaviour and is especially helpful to understand when you are able to observe the animal before they start to feel threatened, so you can gauge a quick baseline of their behaviour.

Coping strategies exist in all mammals, including us. Like all behaviours, coping behaviours fall on a spectrum and can be described in three categories that tell us:

- **How easily an animal perceives threat and becomes aroused**
  This is called ‘emotionality’ and is the difference between a hair trigger temper and an animal who takes a long time to fire up. Emotionality is largely controlled by physiology – this is how quickly an animal’s stress response system kicks in!

- **What they do when they perceive a threat**
  This is called an animal’s ‘coping style’ and tells us how likely the animal is to fight, run, or just sit and wait until they are forced to do something (and hope the scary thing goes away before they do). A passive coping style means they tend to behaviourally shut down in stressful situations. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the bold dogs – the ones who use aggression to take out the threat before it has a chance to do them any harm. It is important to know that all of the different types of responses are triggered by the dog perceiving a threat, so are rooted in fear.

- **How much noise they make when they are feeling threatened**
  This is just called ‘stress vocalisation’ and is fairly self-explanatory. Some animals become quiet when they perceive a threat and some get loud! It is important to know that an animal’s or person’s normal ‘chattiness’ is not indicative of how they respond to stressors, but you can usually tell fairly quickly which way they tend to go just by listening to them as they become aware of the scary thing.

Within the pet dog population, very few individuals fit the description for true ‘boldness’. This is because as dogs evolved alongside humans, we have actively selected dogs who can live peacefully with us – it makes no sense select for pet dogs who bite quickly and deliberately whenever they perceive any threat. As a result, much of the domestic dog population responds to threat with either passive or flighty behaviour and given the option, they will choose these responses over using aggression.

If you keep in mind that you are the trigger for the dog’s behaviour, and use your own behaviour, voice and distance from the animal to increase their feeling of safety, you are far less likely to push the dog into using aggression towards you.

Whenever you are interacting with a dog in an unknown situation, start with the assumption that the dog thinks of you as a threat. When you are at a distance from the dog, they are not paying you any attention, or they are aware that you are there but don’t really care. As you move closer, they begin to feel more threatened and their arousal increases – their focus begins to narrow, and they become more attuned to what you are doing. At this point, most pet dogs will choose to put distance between you and them if they can. If they can’t move away and you keep moving towards them, their arousal level rises sharply and they start to respond – if you have removed all other options (hide or run), then the dog has little option left but to use aggression.

![Diagram showing threat response and coping strategies]

- **Green space – aware but not alarmed**
- **Orange space – feeling threatened but holding it together/choosing avoidance**
- **Red space – actively responding to threat**
- **Outside the circle – not attending to threat**
Context

Context is the who, when and where of behaviour. When we consider context, there’s the obvious stuff like where you and the dog are, and who else is around, the less obvious stuff like the dog’s learning history and their prior relationships with the other people or animals present, and the stuff that you simply cannot know when working with unknown dogs in the field, like their disease status and what is motivating them to behave in a certain way.

When you are working with dogs in the field or shelter, you must remain aware of what is going on in the immediate area around you because it can have a massive impact on the dog.

The two most important things to remember about context are that it affects:

- How the dog sees the situation
- What you have at your disposal to respond to the dog’s behaviour

The dog’s perception of context

In many situations within the world of animal management and welfare, we are working with dogs who are not with their owners and are in novel or unfamiliar environments. This tends to have the effect of heightening the dog’s fear and tendency to perceive threat – everything seems scarier to them.

Conversely, in situations where the dog’s owner is present the dog will likely be less fearful BUT will be more likely to behave proactively (e.g. to bite!) if they do become fearful. Similarly, a dog who appears quite flighty when they are running loose in public may behave very differently and be more likely to use aggression when they are close to home or in their own yard. In an Australian study conducted by Neva Van De Kuyt approximately 2/3rds of dog attacks in public happened immediately adjacent to the home property of the offending dogs – most dogs who bite in public, do so close to home.

Both of these specific contexts are important to remember if you are interacting with an unknown dog, especially if the owner arrives part way through an interaction, or you follow a fearful dog to their home property and then attempt to approach the front door.

Also be mindful of situations with multiple dogs. Not only can multiple dogs do more damage, but dogs (like humans) are prone to social facilitation – if one dog becomes fearful or aggressive, there’s a better than fair chance that the other dogs present will respond similarly. This can even happen with dogs you are somewhat familiar with, so don’t assume that just because you’ve interacted with a dog a few times in a friendly manner that the same rules apply when their less-friendly canine friend is present. Be mindful if you are returning a dog to its home property and there are other dogs at home – remember that property boundaries can be problematic at the best of times.

If you are visiting a person’s home and there is a dog present, consciously assess the dog, the owner’s management of the dog, and how they are interacting with each other.

- How does the dog respond to the owner?
  
  Does the dog check in with the owner by looking up at them or touching them frequently? Does the dog consistently move between you and the owner? Does the dog sit or stand with its back too and pressing against the owner and never take its eyes off you? All of these may be signs that the dog is not perfectly comfortable with your presence.

- Is the owner always consciously aware of their dog?
Is the owner paying attention to the dog and actively managing what the dog is doing? Are they giving the dog clear communication and is the dog responding? Has the owner given you clear instructions about how to interact with the dog, particularly if the dog seems unsure about your presence? If not, ask what you should be doing.

- **Does the owner’s description of the dog match what you see?**

  If not, trust the dog! Owners are a lot like parents and sometimes have rose-coloured glasses when it comes to their dogs. Additionally, some owners may not have had much opportunity to observe their dog’s behaviour with unfamiliar people, particularly within their own home.

- **How is the dog responding to you and others?**

  Does the dog actively solicit interactions in a relaxed and friendly manner? If so, how do they respond when you stop interacting with them? Does the dog’s demeanour change when you move around or approach the owner? Will the take treats (with the owner’s permission of course)? Again, always trust the dog to tell you his truth in that moment – even friendly dogs can get spooked and respond defensively.

**What is around you?**

The other side of the context coin is being aware of where you are and what is around you that may impact on your responses while working with a dog. This includes stuff that makes your job harder, as well as stuff you can use to protect yourself if the situation turns bad.

Tight spaces including doorways or breezeways in kennel blocks can be stressful for dogs to move through, as well as restrictive for you – make sure you are holding your leash appropriately and guiding the dog clearly and effectively through the space (for unknown dogs in unknown places, a fast walk or brisk trot is an ideal speed).

Loading dogs into the back of animal management vehicles can be tricky, especially if you are not skilled at applying a leash muzzle to keep the bitey bit closed while your face is in close proximity.

Entranceways to homes are often close to stairs and balustrading – if a dog comes through the door and you step backwards, are you going to lose your footing or back into a guard rail? Same inside the house – where is the couch/sofa? Is there stuff on the floor that you might trip on, or the dog may get up on top of or jump off?

If you are in a public place, who else is there? Are there other dogs, small children, or potentially vulnerable groups of people? What else is happening and is the dog paying attention to it (if the dog is highly aroused and focused on the other thing, it might not even notice you are there until you touch it!).

What about useful stuff? Any picnic tables or bonnets nearby that you can jump onto if a dog charges you? Is your vehicle locked or is the door open - can you get back in quickly? Are their chairs, wheelie bins or other large moveable objects that you can use to block a dog’s path? What about a fence with a gate or that is low enough to jump? Is the dog close enough that you can throw a bunch of food at its face to distract it?

Whenever you arrive in a situation involving a dog, take a minute to take stock of what’s going on with the dog and the environment – even in the unlikely event that the dog is on a rage-filled rampage, you are in a vehicle when you arrive and will be safer and more effective if you take stock and make a quick mental plan. Look around the environment and mentally take note of where the escape routes are for both you and the dog. Look at the tight spots, the tripping hazards, the stuff you can use as barriers, pay attention to what the dog is attending to and how highly aroused they are – is that changing and if so, what appears to be causing the change? **Time taken to assess and plan is never wasted because at very least it will make your job easier, if not a lot safer!**