

The Zen of Dog Training: Part 4

Environmental Impact

Environment: /en-vahy-ruh n-muh nt/ noun. (*Dictionary.com*) **1.** The surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates; **2.** The social and cultural forces that shape the life of a species.

By Kimberly Artley

So far, The Zen of Dog Training series has covered how to meet and fulfill a dog's instinctual needs as a member of the canine species; how humans factor into dogs' behavior; and how canine genetics are important.

Now, the focus is on how a dog's living environment influences and impacts behavior. This aspect of a dog's life is just as important as the others.

For example, what if your dog abruptly started urinating in the house after years of being reliably house-trained. Or if your dog started barking incessantly. Or began shedding more than usual. Or started fence-fighting with other dogs, chewing up furniture, shoes or other parts of the house, licking him or herself excessively, or practicing other bizarre behaviors. What if the dog owner can't quite pinpoint what the cause may be? You've had a complete vet check, and everything is good-to-go. So what gives? Thus, it's time to do some detective work.

Behavior is a form of expression. When odd behaviors occur suddenly, there's always a reason—health, medical or otherwise. It's up to dog owners to figure out what our dogs are trying to tell us, and to work to make things right.

Some questions to consider are:

- Have there been any recent changes or shifts in the dog's schedule or routine?
- Has there been a change with the dog's feeding? Have there been changes in the type of food served, or the time of feeding?
- Did one of the dog's primary caretakers acquire a new job, possibly prompting new time limitations and restrictions, or related new stresses?
- Have there been any changes to the dog's exercise routine? Have there been changes in the time, duration and intensity of the dog's exercise?
- Has there been any home improvement activity going on within the home?
- Is there new home decor, renovations or additions?
- Has anyone new moved into the home? Is there a new roommate, a new baby, a new friend, or new family or in-laws in the house?
- Is someone new coming to exercise the dog?
- Is the dog crated for too long, or was there a poor introduction to the crate?



- Has anyone who the dog was used to having around moved out? Have any children left for college? Has a significant-other moved away or been deployed?
- Is there any type of construction taking place outside the home?
- Has there been a death in the family or pack unit, or has someone fallen ill?
- Is there anything else that could be interrupting the normal, usual feel of the household?

A dog's environment can trigger certain reactions and responses, affect health and behavior, and also provoke their natural, in-born drives such as prey, pack, fight and avoidance.

The four main factors that make up our living environment are people and energy; location; living space; and sensory stimulation.

People and Energy

Every living thing is comprised of, and influenced by, energy. Since we're all energetic beings, this is how dogs assess, know and respond to us (and each other). This is why it's important for people to try and find a good energy match when welcoming a dog into their home. Most people choose dogs by how they look and what breed they are; however, just like with humans, dogs are far more than just looks. They are living, breathing, feeling, sentient beings, who are totally dependent on us to meet and fulfill their species, individual and breed-specific needs.

Dogs are our mirror, and a direct reflection of the types of energy they consistently share space with. And some people could be struggling with their emotional, physical and mental health in a household.

Dog owners need to make sure that everyone who lives in the household is on board in regards to the training and conditioning behavior of the house's

dog. Otherwise, any efforts and strides made can be diminished by an alternative effort, or lack thereof, creating confusion on the canine end and frustration on the human end. Having an inconsistent environment will set any dog up for failure.

Location

A dog can have a tough time being an urbanite. City living could involve many people in a dense area; issues involving personal space; multiple rules, laws, limitations and restrictions; too many buildings, walls, artificial turfs; pollution; and a lack of open, natural, clean and green spaces.

With country dogs, the lifestyle could be more relaxed. In the country, there can be more green space; open fields; fresh air; and more people more acclimated to dogs. Dogs could be left outside to roam, and some of them could be un-neutered and not spayed. These dogs create more puppies, some of whom may or may not get homes. Also, dogs running free could run away, be stolen, be sold, be used as bait dogs in dog-fighting rings, get hit by moving vehicles, or get picked up and placed in small, under-funded, high-kill shelters with little exposure. These dogs have little chance of finding a loving, responsible and committed home.

Living Space

Studies have shown the massive impact that living space has on health and behavior. Is it clean? If so, is it cleaned with various types of harsh, chemical and toxic cleaners, or natural, organic, non-toxic cleaners? Is it clutter- dust-, animal-dander and mold-free?

When there are too many things piled and cluttered in a space, it becomes a breeding ground for things like dust mites, mold, dander, germs and other allergens. Not only are they a health hazard, but the entire picture becomes a constant source of frustration, stress and energy drain on people.

Besides securing the living area, dog owners need to provide the physical and mental outlets for dogs to drain their energy.

How living spaces are kept and maintained speaks volumes, and several studies have shown a correlation between this and a person's emotional, mental and physical health. Consistent disorder, chaos and mess in our home, work, and even our car-space, can be related to a person's emotional, mental and physical disorder, chaos and mess. Whatever affects people, also affects their dogs. Dogs live in and share the same living space, breathe the same air, and absorb the emotional impact that the living conditions have on their humans.

Much like people can child-proof a home, dog owners should take the same precautions for dogs. Dog owners should not be leaving things around that could easily get swallowed or chewed; should keep medications, cleaning supplies, and other items containing dangerous chemicals out of reach; ensuring that any holes and small spaces are blocked off; not leave apple cores, grape stems, chocolate and other toxic foods laying around; keep the lid of the trash can tight and secure; keep the lid of the toilet down, especially if you use chemical toilet cleaners; and make sure that any wires from electronics are out of reach.

Besides securing the living area, dog owners need to provide the physical and mental outlets for dogs to drain their energy. This promotes and contributes to a dog's state of health and state of mind. This also prevents stress, frustration and boredom. When dogs have energy to burn, and their owners do not provide them with daily opportunities to release it, dogs figure out a way to release that energy.

Common dog stress relievers and boredom-busters are excessive barking, chewing and shredding; digging; jumping; whining; pacing; tail-chasing; licking; over-shedding; fence-fighting; and hyperactive and restless states of mind. If dogs do not receive a daily outlet of energy, some dogs could elicit aggressive tendencies. This is how dogs show that their needs aren't being met.

Sensory Stimulation

It's important, especially when conditioning and shaping puppies, to provide various forms of sensory stimulation. When dogs are able to experience a range of sights, sounds, smells, temperatures, textures, tastes, and different types of scenarios, they're allowed to be more like a dog. Their senses are awakened and strengthened, preventing sensory deprivation, and they become accustomed to, and familiar with, the world around them. The more that dog owners expose their dogs to a variety of experiences, the more confident, equipped and well-rounded the dogs become. Consistent exposure to varied experiences is a great way to prevent future fears.

Dogs are influenced and impacted by their environment, reacting and responding directly to that environment. Humans comprise a large portion of a dog's life. It is the responsibility of dog owners, as caretakers, to provide their dogs with what they need to live a high-quality, healthful life, and to also provide for their dogs the ability to maintain a sound, balanced state of mind through which to enjoy that life. 🐾

