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Animal Behaviorist Christina Johnson

Helps pets, owners find balance

By Patricia Ann Chaffee

Animal behaviorist, Christina Johnson of Richmond, is finding herself increasingly in demand as pets move up the social hierarchy within families. More and more, pets are taking on significant roles in the family structure and challenging behaviors can result. Pets are clearly a bigger part of the family.

“What’s not to love. Dogs offer unconditional love,” says Johnson.

Johnson works primarily with dogs who have severe behavioral problems which can include separation anxiety, aggression issues with their humans as well as other dogs, fears/phobias and dominance aggression.

“I understand dog behavior as a whole. By asking questions, observing body language, interaction with humans and how the dog behaves in the home, I can assess where the problem is and determine how to solve it,” she says.

Resolution often involves restructuring the social hierarchy in the home. The dog needs to be the low ranking member in the household and often that is not the case.

Her services begin with a temperament profile at the dog’s home where she asks questions of the owner to assess the situation. This paints a picture of the dog as an individual and helps assess the house-hold activity that may need to change. “It is important to see the dog’s behavior in their own environment,” says Johnson. The goal is to create a more harmonious relationship within the household.

After doing the profile she creates a series of exercises in response to the needs that are determined by the profile. She teaches the owners how to implement those exercises, which eventually lead to a maintenance program. Visits are scheduled in the home every week or two depending on the situation and most problems can be remedied with an average of 3 to 5 sessions.

“Most problems happen in the home environment or on walks,” says Johnson.

Dogs need a solid set of rules and privileges so boundaries are clearly defined. Dogs act out to assess boundaries when they are unclear.

Johnson points out that it is important to remember we are different species. Humans are naturally a giving species while dogs are naturally a taking species.

“They are constantly self centered. They will grab the bone and run,” says Johnson. “Humans give privileges and dogs see it as weakness.”

Lately there is a growing inclination to use positive reinforcement in changing behaviors. Clicker training, a form of operant conditioning is often used with dogs who are phobic and gentle leaders are more common these days, suggesting the use of a head halter as opposed to the choke chain.

Most behavior problems can be prevented according to Johnson by considering four things.

1. People should do some research before they get a dog to make sure they get one that will fit in with the families lifestyle. Certain breeds have different needs and getting the wrong one can spell trouble.
2. Keep in mind that on average a dog can be a 10-15 year commitment.
3. Bring your dog for puppy classes immediately when appropriate. When they are young it is important for them to have opportunities for social interaction with people as well as other dogs.
4. Teach them basic training.

Johnson has been working with dogs for more than 10 years. She is a member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers and has attended many seminars through that organization where she says she has learned a lot from very knowledgeable people from around the world.

She has two dogs of her own, Diva, a 9 ½ year old Keeshond and Moxie, a 1 ½ year old Chow-Chow, who are both therapy-dog certified. Together, they visit the Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence every other week.

For more information contact Christina Johnson at (401) 539-0947.