

Agility

Guarding Optimism

by Fiona Ferrar



So what is the similarity between the two creatures in the pictures above? Puppy pics are soooo cute, that I needed to include more of them!

Well they are all cute babies, all looking rather happy, and all dependant on us for guarding their optimism for a few years at least.

Most puppies arrive at their new homes as happy little bundles of fluff. Some enjoy cuddles more than others, but in general they love attention from their new family and are optimistic in their outlook. They trust that food will arrive regularly, there are fun things in the environment to play with, and that their owners like their company and are there for good times. It is up to us to ensure that that positive outlook in life continues.

It can be hard to be optimistic when life always appears to be the same and there are no new things or experiences. One of the most beneficial things that we can do for our puppies is to expose them to new experiences and things, but in a very mindful way. In guarding their optimism, we don't want to expose them to anything that is truly frightening. On the contrary, we should introduce them to lots

of slightly different things and experiences and make sure that we are watching how they react and are able to remove them from the situation if it becomes too much.

My current dogs are all reasonably optimistic and good natured. I had an experience last year which makes me feel slightly sick when I remember it. Cuda is exceptionally good natured, loving all people and dogs alike. I was visiting a friend, knew her dog was not great with other dogs, but I thought I could manage the situation. I took Cuda into the house, and all was ok while I was concentrating on keeping him beside me on the couch. Then I got distracted and got up from the couch. I will never forget the look on his face when he was bailed up at the end of the hall by a ferocious smaller dog who bit him in several places. It was like he was saying "I trusted you"! At the time I thought I had been unworthy of his trust. For several months after that, Cuda was noticeably wary of strange dogs. That was after five years of only ever having positive experiences, so this was something completely new to him. A year further on and he seems to have forgotten. I have not though, and am much more

aware of not putting my dogs in unfortunate situations just because they are good natured, and can probably deal with them.

So it is very important to keep watching your dogs when out and about, and assessing when a situation is easy for them or slightly out of their comfort zone to a situation that makes them shut down, or just go crazy. The former is good, the latter is not!

When puppies are young, most new things are interesting and are to be investigated. If puppies don't have bad experiences those things will continue to be interesting and to be investigated. As they grow older, things can change. They may start to experience being "told off". While many owners like the idea of only being positive, and never punishing their dogs, it can be harder in practice. If a puppy finds toilet training challenging and leaves a mess, chances are there will have been some signal that it wasn't a good thing. That might be the first time the puppy is exposed to a less than pleasant experience. The severity and frequency of those less than pleasant experiences can have a huge impact on the puppy. It is unlikely that a puppy can make the link between leaving a mess, and being told off. So the puppy might go from life all being a fun happy place, to a life where random unpleasant things can happen and they have no idea why that is. Each unpleasant event that happens erodes optimism. So when interacting with your puppy/young dog/older dog, have a think about whether those actions are going to build optimism or erode it.

So while it is very important to do this with puppies, it continues to be important throughout your dog's life. When you teach an older dog a complex thing, their ability to learn has already been impacted by earlier experiences either positive or negative.

Using weaves as an example, if a dog is worried about handler/environment/reward being used, then that worry can begin to be associated with the weaves, and that can last a long time. Weaving is an interesting exercise as it is rather complex for a dog to learn. I have seen many dogs be able to weave well at home, but have issues at shows. Often that is because the handler may not have proofed the weaves in different locations in a less stressful environment before competing at a show. And when competing, there are not many of us who stay mindful of our dog's optimism when the pressure and excitement mounts.

So why the picture of the baby? Well he is pretty cute too! But while guarding optimism is very important in our dogs, it is also important for ourselves. Hopefully our parents have done a reasonable job of protecting us through our early years, but sooner or later we are on our own making our own decisions about what we do, and who we associate with. The job of protecting our own optimism rests with us. Think about the people you associate with, and whether they have a positive or negative influence. There are many people in the world who, either intentionally or not, are very good at bringing you down. Think about what people might say at the end of an agility run.

One friend might say "that was an amazing running dog walk, you must be really pleased at how your training is going".

Another friend might say "shame about those wide turns", or "you were lucky with the judges call on that contact".

What would your reaction be to the two different statements? Are you the type of person who would say the first statement or the second? Would you like to be the type of person who would say the first statement or the second?

The more we surround ourselves with positive and optimistic people, then the more positive and optimistic we will be. And life is just so much easier when we and our dogs are optimistic.

So have a think about your own life, and the lives of your dog(s). Are you all living in an optimistic world? And if not, what could you do to change it?



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