

Integrating the Tellington TTouch Method in Guide Dog Training

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Abstract

The Tellington TTouch method is used to reduce stress and relax animals so they can learn more effectively. It aims to increase an animal's body awareness and balance by using a combination of techniques that include specific touches, body wraps and leading (movement) exercises. This article discusses the method and its potential role in guide dog training.

Introduction

Guide dog training can be stressful for even the most robust dog. Unfavourable effects of training include increased anxiety, reduced concentration and a decreased ability to learn (Roe & Madigan, 2008a,b; Vincent & Michell, 1996). Months of training are required to produce a guide dog, where the dog learns many tasks including those with a high level of discrimination. However, many dogs are withdrawn from training (Goddard and Beilharz, 1984) and some after qualifying as a guide (Lloyd, La Grow, Budge and Stafford, 2003; Stafford, Erceg, Kyono, Lloyd and Phipps, 2003) due to anxiety and fear-based behaviours resulting in considerable wastage for guide dog schools. Analyses of the records of training centres in England, U.S.A. and Australia by Goddard and Beilharz (1984) indicated that dogs failed not because they could not learn what was required, but because competing responses such as fear, interfered with the dog's performance.

Guide dog schools are challenged with developing dogs that are sensitive enough to be managed by their trainers and owners, yet temperamentally able to deal with the stress of training and working environments (Pouliot, 2002). Typically, dogs commencing training are young (12-20 months old) and have recently left their 'puppy-walking' families to live in a kennel environment. Therefore incorporating techniques to help these dogs relax, increase confidence and focus can assist learning and improve the welfare of the dogs. Combining the Tellington TTouch method (or TTouch) as an adjunct to traditional guide dog training may help to achieve these goals. This paper will introduce the TTouch method, its rationale and discuss ways that it may affect the training and development of guide dogs.

The Tellington TTouch method

TTouch is named after its originator, Linda Tellington-Jones. The method is based on her extensive experience of animals combined with the study of Feldenkrais; the latter being a technique designed to improve human function by increasing self-awareness through

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movement. The primary focus of TTouch is to help an animal become more relaxed so that it can learn more effectively. It also aims to help an animal become more 'comfortable' with its own body, to influence physical (bodily) balance. TTouch is used to support training, behaviour modification and veterinary care. An additional benefit is said to be the strengthening of the human-animal bond through increased understanding and better communication (personal communication with Edie Jane Eaton, International TTouch Practitioner and Feldenkrais Practitioner, March 2007). There are 2 aspects to the TTouch method – body work and ground work, which will be described for the dog:

Body work consists of (a) body wraps and (b) specific touches. Body wraps (e.g. elastic bandage to create localised pressure) are used to enhance a dog's sense of its own body and influence its confidence in movements and behaviour. Touches are based on precise circular movements, slides and lifts that can be applied all over the body. These can be used to relax the dog and to identify areas of tension. Ground work comprises of leading (movement) exercises, which can help the dog develop more self-control by bringing it into physical balance. Obstacle courses ('confidence courses') can be made with various props to improve the dog's co-ordination and confidence. These exercises enable the dog to experience and explore moving differently (i.e. non-habitually), which can influence its self-carriage, balance and focus.

TTouch and Guide Dog Training

Using TTouch as an adjunct to traditional guide dog training can be useful in many respects. These include issues with: coordination, focus, accepting equipment, adaptability, reactivity, confidence, self-control and distraction. There is often more than one cause that leads to a particular behaviour. TTouch techniques help to identify factors which may be contributing towards the behaviour, and establish a starting point to work from. Addressing these factors individually can reduce the intensity of the problem or help to extinguish certain behaviours.

The touches used in TTouch provide light pressure just below the level of the skin. This enhances sensory processing and integration with the intent of achieving a level of engaged focus, (better to learn new behaviours), rather than deeper states of relaxation that are affiliated with deep tissue massage (Cascade, 2004). The touches along with body wraps help raise awareness to particular parts of the body and might be useful for dogs with a degree of 'body sensitivity' to learn to accept contact and equipment. The touches can also be used during training walks to settle anxious dogs.

It is commonly understood that the mental, emotional and physical aspects of any being are interwoven, and the conditions of the body and behaviour can influence one another. Dogs, like people, can become accustomed to moving in habitual ways. Roe and Madigan (2008a) propose that there is a direct relationship between posture/tension and behaviour, and by changing a particular posture it may be possible to influence emotions and thus behaviour. Groundwork exercises provide the dog with opportunities to make decisions. Varying these exercises to meet the dog's individual needs and allowing it some freedom of choice might help a guide dog reach its potential in its working role. It is feasible that dogs that are not afforded some measure of choice have less chance to develop self-control.

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An important aspect of integrating TTouch into guide dog training is the issue of 'balance'. If a dog is well balanced (or grounded) its weight is distributed more evenly, and thus it is potentially better able to negotiate an obstacle. In addition, TTouch practitioners (Roe & Madigan, 2008a) suggest that a dog in physical balance has more self-control. A TTouch tool, the balance leash, has been adapted for guiding work to help a dog balance with the intent of improving focus, self-control and confidence. Additionally, when a dog becomes distracted or is fearful its posture can change, which may affect balance. Having two points of contact (e.g. lead attached to a flat collar and a harness) allows the trainer to help the dog regain balance and influence its movements/positioning in a variety of situations, and to develop the skills required for its working role.

Conclusion

Incorporating the TTouch method as an adjunct to traditional guide dog training may help to reduce stress and help dogs learn, which might be of particular value during the sometimes difficult transition from the puppy scheme to training. TTouch can help to identify problems and prevent problems developing, and the techniques may help the dog develop skills that will enhance its body movement, balance and body awareness. There is also the potential to broaden the trainer's understanding of the dog's ability and temperament. This could help trainers make more timely decisions regarding a dog's future as a guide.

Further research is required to measure the effects of integrating TTouch into guide dog training and the effects on the dogs' sensory system. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the techniques have positively influenced the quality of several guide dogs in New Zealand and Canada, as well as other New Zealand working dogs including Detector Dogs and Assistance Dogs. Case studies are currently being prepared for publication.

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