

Dog trainer **Lez Graham** explains how our relationships with dogs have altered over the past 30 years.



Family life, and how we interact with dogs, has changed significantly over the past 30 years.

Changing times

I recently received an email that was doing the rounds entitled 'How old is Grandma?' It's a very clever email which lists all the things that have changed in Grandma's lifetime; from the invention of television and pantikillin to frozen food and the contraceptive pill. It then talks about sayings, or rather how the English language has evolved and words have changed; 'grass was mowed, coke was a cold drink and pot was something your mother cooked in' - you get the idea. Society has changed so much over the past 30 or so years;

with advances in technology come changes in work life, and ultimately our home life with our family and pets.

MY FIRST DOG

My first dog, Kym, was an awesome black and tan mutt. She looked like a Labrador but with German Shepherd Dog markings, and came from my sister whose young dog had been 'caught' by the local stud while my sister was out. Although 'unknown parentage' doesn't quite fit, my sister's dog looked like a black and tan Pharaoh Hound and her 'stud' was a giant of

a black dog believed to be a Labrador cross something, cross something else. This was quite the norm back then and pedigree dogs, certainly in the north east in the early 1970s, were unheard of.

My dog used to walk with me to the corner of my school whereupon she would head back home and pick up her mate (who lived a couple of doors down) and roam around the streets. She was back at the corner at lunchtime to carry my school bag home and the routine was repeated again in

the afternoon.

Not only did I have the joy of being walked to and from school by my best friend, but my dog also got to 'escort' a member of her pack to a droppings-off place to have a game of ball with the local pack that she was a part of. Was Kym a contented dog? Yes. A tired dog? Most definitely. A dog up to mischief? No, she was too tired after being out all day with her mates.

Her diet consisted of canned dog food and scraps/leftovers

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from the family meals as well as bones and scraps from our local butcher - and, yes, a couple of times a week she produced white dog poo (which really is a thing of the past).

She wasn't allowed on the settee as to replace it would have cost an arm and a leg and so my dog stayed on the floor. Also, because central heating really was a luxury rather than the norm, she had to walk by the door to be allowed in and out of a room rather than having free access. This dog was, however, allowed in my bedroom - the one and only dog that has been.

MODERN TIMES

Owning and living with a dog is one of the best things that life has to offer, and I know that when my dogs aren't around the house feels empty. But dog ownership and the relationship we have with our dogs has changed over the years.

It's now more usual for both partners to work and for Mum to go back to work after having children. Although money seems to be as tight as ever, in the current economy, we do have more disposable income than perhaps our parents would have had. We live in a culture of fast lives

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which brings with it fast food, convenience stores and lost time to 'just be'. As part of this change in lifestyle and culture, the dog, whether he wanted to or not, has also had to change.

Traditional family life has changed, and rather than waiting until the first child is born and Mum giving up work, more couples are getting a dog first - perhaps as a dry run prior to having children, instead of having children or because they want to have children later. Unless you've had a dog in your own place, or had a child, you have no idea what a commitment or just how time-consuming that is... and don't get me started on the first time you realise just how much hair your dog sheds each day!

Central heating, I believe, has played a big part in changing the balance of the relationship at home. No longer is the dog asking permission to leave the room or waiting for you to get up so he can get what he wants - rather he can come and go as he chooses as doors are left open around the house.

With the advent of disposable goods and soft furnishings being cheaper than

ever, the dog will have his place on the sofa and possibly the bed. This is not the end of the world in itself, but for a dog that has no balance between discipline and reward, is under-walked, under-stimulated and has privileges aplenty, then he can become an explosive mix at adolescence, if not before.

FASHIONS

Man, or rather man of the western world, has become a materialistic 'got-to-have-now' creature, looking out for the latest craze and getting it. Unfortunately this culture has extended itself into the world of dog ownership and the past few years have seen a rise in the ownership of 'teacup' dogs, thanks to the many fashion magazines showing dogs in designer handbags and celebrities cuddling their 'babies' and never letting them walk anywhere.

There's also been a surge of the 'designer' dog, the Labrador, spanner, cockapoo and so on. Much unlike the old Heinz 57 dogs of old, which were generally healthier and hardier, these new mutts are mixes of breeds.



Dogs have adapted to our changing lifestyles.

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that can have genetic problems or behaviour issues and, from what I've seen (bearing in mind I don't get called to someone's home to sort out their well-mannered, well-behaved dog), these dogs tend to have the worst of both breeds.

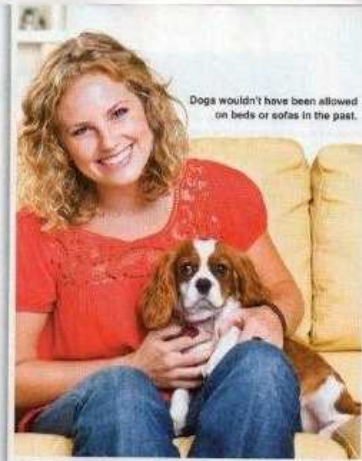
PRESSURES OF SOCIETY

Time is tight and spare time seems virtually non-existent these days. We no longer have the time (or the energy) to take our dogs to training classes or to put in the hours needed to teach them to be well-mannered on the lead.

It's my opinion that, as we've become busier, we've stopped talking to each other and the sense of community and

community parenting is waning; political correctness is taking over and people are scared of chastising their children, let alone someone else's. We're also being more indulgent of our children. Whether this is out of guilt, tiredness or trying to keep everyone happy I don't know, but it's becoming commonplace that if a child wants something then the child will get it - be it the latest gadget, piece of technology or to open sweeties that are yet unpaid for.

Unfortunately the same is happening with our dogs. In the same way that some children are ruling the home so too, it appears, are some dogs. They are being allowed to mob



Dogs wouldn't have been allowed on beds or sofas in the past.

other dogs on walks and jump all over strangers. When asking owners to control their dogs or why they're letting their dog do it, the normal response is that their dog wants to.

TIME TO CHANGE

And so with technological advances - the very changes that were meant to give us more time to do the things we wish - we have to work harder and put in longer hours, giving us less time to enjoy the simple things in life. Our dogs have been remarkably hardy and pliable; for the most part going with the flow regarding changes in lifestyle, from being given bones in the garden following a long walk while the owner patters around indoors, to having dried food chucked in a bowl after a quick walk as they rush off to work. Without this adaptability the dog wouldn't have been as successful as he is.

However, some of the changes to our lifestyles have been detrimental to our relationship with our pet dog. All we need to do is look at the number of dogs that are in rescue centres or being destroyed to realise it's time to change our relationship again. Dogs, like every other animal on the planet, are governed by the law of survival. They have

no ethics, morals or principles and will quite literally go with the flow or rise to a challenge. We have to take the lead in changing the relationship so that the rescue centres aren't being overloaded and our dogs can relax and enjoy being dogs again. This could mean putting off when to get a dog, employing a dog walker to live your dog out or putting him in doggy day care while you're at work.

It's time to introduce balance and bring back some common sense in our relationship with our favourite companion.

Oh, I almost forgot, Grandma (in the email), surprisingly, would only have been 38!

Next month Lez looks at how changing family relationships can affect dogs.

About the author

Lez Graham works full-time as a canine behaviour practitioner and granddog trainer. She is the education and development officer with the Guild of Dog Trainers and is a tutor with the Cambridge Institute of Dog Behaviour & Training. Lez has just published her first book, *The Pet Galaxy*.

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