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## INTRODUCTION

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We knew we were in the market for a new furry family member, but we were not expecting it to happen so fast. My wife loves dachshunds, and I wanted a Weimaraner. So, we took it as a sign from heaven when a dog popped up on a rescue site in Louisiana that looked like a combination of these two breeds.

I called to inquire about the pup and was directed to complete an online application. My wife did so, but we genuinely thought the dog would be adopted by some caring family who lived much closer to the shelter than our home in Texas.

Though a dozen others wanted to give the dog a new home, we were the first ones on the list. We had passed the background check, so if we wanted her, the puppy was ours. Fast-forward twenty-four hours, including a twelve-hour round-trip car ride, and LaRoux (Lah-roo) arrived at our home.

My wife and I were excited to spend quality time with our new dog after we had both recently retired from the school system. In doing so, we realized LaRoux needed some behavior modification, so we enrolled her in a puppy class. Our main goal was to get her into good habits while she was still young and open to instruction.

The class instructors had good strategies for shaping the pups' behaviors, but what stood out to me more was their ability to help us, the dog owners, look at behaviors differently. That's when it hit me: This class isn't for the dogs; it's for the humans.

I noticed a distinct pattern during the classes between how the instructors and the owners viewed the dogs' behaviors. I, for one, was guilty of explaining misbehavior through the lens of judgment:

"LaRoux, you know what you are supposed to do."

"You're being a little toot! Stop that."

"You refuse to listen—and you think this is funny. Don't you?"

However, the instructors always reframed comments in a way that took judgment out, providing rational explanations for the behaviors:

"She's probably confused. We've been throwing a lot of directions at her."

"LaRoux just wants to play with her friends."

"Take your dogs for a short walk. They need to get out some energy."

I understood why the instructors took this view; after all, we were working with puppies. However, as I moved through the intermediate and advanced classes, I noticed their perspective didn't change as the dogs got older. They always looked at behaviors through a lens of understanding rather than judgment.

*These ladies aren't supernatural dog whisperers, I thought. They are simply good behavior detectives with kind hearts. When problems arose, rather than getting frustrated and chastising the animals, they assumed positive intent and, thus, looked for logical reasons which could explain the dogs' behaviors.*

They looked beyond raw behaviors and tried to identify the needs driving them. Once the needs were determined, they focused on getting them met in natural ways that

built positive habits and kept misbehavior at bay. I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like if we took this same approach when working with children.



Understanding human behavior is tough, which makes changing it even more difficult.

Trust me; I've worked with teachers and parents to improve kids' behaviors for several decades.

***Understanding human behavior is tough, which makes changing it even more difficult.***

Though I have provided support at all levels, for the past several years, the number of inquiries I've received from early childhood centers, childcare providers, and the younger grades of elementary schools has increased dramatically. The requests usually sound something like this:

"Do you provide staff development on behavior management? We are an elementary campus that services kids through fifth grade, and our teachers are begging for support. Though all the teachers could benefit from some training, our real problems are with the younger students. The lower the grade, the more behavior concerns we see. Our staff is spending all their time putting out fires. I'm not sure what it is, but we've never had so many problems like this."

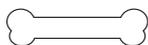
These calls predictably started rolling in the year after the pandemic. After kids had stayed home for an extended period, providers and teachers faced the reality of what I call "Covid behavioral regression." In other words, kids were not acting their ages.

Adults expected to see some *academic* deficits when the pandemic settled out and kids returned to their regular settings, but the *behavioral* lags caught everyone off guard. Children were demonstrating behaviors typical at much earlier stages of development. One teacher told me, “I have a room full of two-and-a-half-year-old children. But the poor things! They’re trapped in four-year-old pre-kindergarten bodies!”

It makes sense that we would see more significant concerns and gaps in younger children simply based on development. The difference between a 38- and 39-year-old adult is not that noticeable. However, the differences are vast when comparing a 12- and 24-month-old child. This is why we’ve seen more significant lags in younger children. Their lack of experiences and exposure during the pandemic adversely impacted their social and emotional development, which we see through their behaviors.

In these post-pandemic years, kids need support as they work to catch up and acquire the behavioral skills required for healthy development. This book aims to meet this need.

***In these post-pandemic years, kids need support as they work to catch up and acquire the behavioral skills required for healthy development.***



I hear it all the time: “You work with young children? That must be so much easier than with the older ones!” My response is always the same, “Clearly, you have never seen

the old Arnold Schwarzenegger movie *Kindergarten Cop*." *Easy* is not the first word that comes to mind.

Whether or not the work is harder or easier is a matter of opinion. What is important to note is that working with young children is different. *Different* is an important distinction because when trying to support the needs of young children, we can't just modify strategies appropriate for older ones; we must view tasks differently. As adults who successfully work with this population can tell you, development has to be the first lens through which we look when approaching situations.

As LaRoux was working her way through the various puppy classes, the instructors would make a point, and I would find myself thinking the same thing: *That's not about dog behaviors; that's not about kids' behaviors; it's just about what young developing brains need for healthy development.* And that, I discovered, was the key to their successful outcomes. The instructors focused on developmental needs rather than outward behaviors. Puppy training has helped me see how adults often get into the trap of focusing on children's external behaviors rather than the developmental needs which drive them. In doing so, we look at the behaviors with an adult lens of judgment rather than one of understanding and empathy.

This book is designed to look beyond outward behaviors and, instead, at what young developing brains need to survive and thrive.



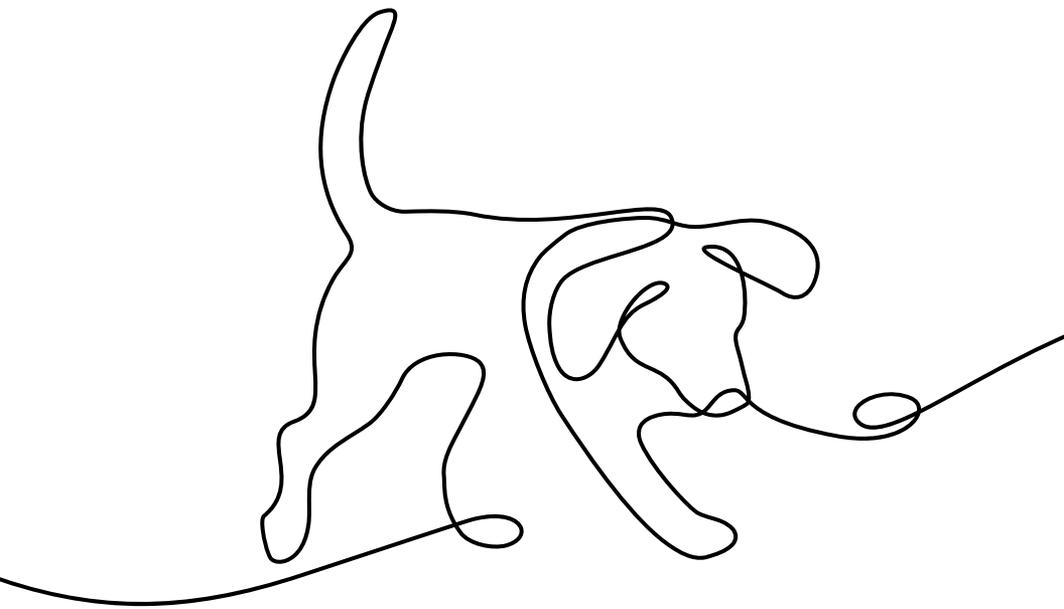
As you read through each chapter, take a moment to “paws” and reflect on how our actions as adults can often work against our efforts to shape healthy development.

## LESSON LEARNED

# The brain will get its needs met one way or another.

Behavior in young development serves as communication. Children behave in ways that help them get their needs met. If we can discover the root causes of the needs that drive behaviors, we can be proactive in helping children get them met in healthy ways, decreasing the likelihood of their trying to get them met, often unconsciously, through misbehavior.

I have two requests as you continue reading *Lessons from LaRoux*. First, put on your investigator hat and search for the underlying needs of the behaviors you encounter. And second, adopt the philosophy of assuming positive intent. I believe kids do the best they are able with the skills at their disposal. This approach has never steered me wrong. Hopefully, in doing these things, by the end of this book, you, too, like LaRoux's trainers, will become a great behavior detective.



## CHAPTER ONE

# EMOTIONAL --- GROUNDING

**W**hen LaRoux arrived at our home, we were happy to see how good-natured she was. Like most puppies, she got along well with our other animals and was very affectionate and social. She was especially friendly to new people and other dogs she encountered. Sometimes she'd get so excited that her bladder failed. This often happened while she ran around our living room, jumping on and off the couch. She couldn't contain herself...literally. This was a behavior we needed to change.



Having had dogs before, we knew what to do. “Bad dog!” we would say, using a stern voice. Outside we would take her, directing her to “do her business” there. Of course, at that point, she really had no business to do. With a confused look and an already empty bladder, she would sit in the grass and wait. Eventually, we would take her back into the house until we faced the same troubling behavior the next time.

LaRoux also tended to put her teeth on people when they played with her. Mind you—I didn’t say *bite*. She never clamped down. She did, however, use her mouth like paws. She’d grab people’s arms or hands and just stare at them. Though I understood that she wasn’t doing this in an aggressive manner, I knew we couldn’t let her continue to “talk” with her teeth. This was another problematic behavior we needed to stop.

“No, LaRoux,” she would hear. “We don’t put our teeth on people.” We figured she didn’t understand our words but hoped the tone in our voices conveyed the message. We also stopped playing with her when this happened. Sadly, the “teeth on people” issue continued with no change in her behavior.

Our immediate response in both these situations was to punish LaRoux. Accidents in the house? Take her outside. Putting her teeth on people? No more playing. Though these strategies sometimes successfully stopped behaviors in the short term, they weren't eliminating them for good.

While driving LaRoux to puppy training one day, I remember thinking about these specific problem behaviors and wondering, *When will LaRoux learn?* As I quickly discovered in the class that followed, my thought process should have been different. The real question I should have asked myself was, *When will LaRoux's dad learn?*

As soon as LaRoux entered the training area of her class, she ran up to one of her friends, a giant Labrador retriever, and left a puddle right next to him. Then, she greeted the lab's owner by gently putting her teeth on the lady's hand. "Welcome to the world of the excited young puppy," the trainer said as she went to get a paper towel to clean up the mess.

As I pulled LaRoux away to take her to her spot, the lightbulb in my head finally turned on. LaRoux's behaviors were not conscious responses or choices but emotional reactions triggered by the surrounding environment. This is why punishment wasn't working. Rather than focusing on LaRoux's behaviors, I needed to focus on managing her emotional state through the environment. LaRoux needed grounding.



Our surroundings matter. When walking into a room full of people, we can immediately feel the emotional climate

without anyone saying a word. And this emotional climate can have a substantial impact on our emotional states. Put another way—emotions feed emotions.

Kids are significantly impacted by their surroundings because regions of their brains that regulate their emotions are not yet well developed. Rather than managing and guiding their feelings internally, they often take cues from external stimuli. For this reason, adults need to be aware of the environment kids are exposed to so we don't inadvertently escalate behaviors in the process.

## MANAGING THE ENVIRONMENT

Overstimulation—that was the reason LaRoux put her teeth on people and had potty accidents. She got excited, and the emotional parts of her brain overrode the cognitive structures needed to make good choices. She was reacting to her emotions rather than being able to respond to them.

This often happens to young children when they are playing together. They “ramp up” quickly but have a more difficult time calming down. Their young development impacts this, but it is also because they feed off each other's heightened emotional states. So, rather than working with young developing brains to make better choices when overstimulated, the first response should be altering the environmental factors that trigger their behaviors.

### Our Behaviors

Ever play the game “Follow the Leader?” This game serves as a

*When children are in a heightened emotional state, their brains are less likely to process spoken information than react to emotional cues.*

great reminder that kids will follow our lead. So, we need to be intentional about modeling calm behaviors. When children are in a heightened emotional state, their brains are less likely to process spoken information than react to emotional cues. This makes our emotional demeanor very important.



Knowing that children feed off our emotional states, it is essential for adults not to inadvertently overstimulate children with our emotional states, be that excitement or frustration. Though adults can more quickly calm down once stimulated, this process takes longer for young developing brains.

### **The Behavior of Others**

Divide and conquer—it's a simple yet often underutilized strategy. Just as children feed off our emotional state, so do they react to the emotions and behaviors of others. Accordingly, removing the audience is a very effective strategy for helping a child stay calm and grounded.

When we get a child alone, we eliminate a great deal of external stimulation, which can quickly change the emotional temperature of a situation. And as any teacher can confirm, children respond differently to us when peers are not around. When we speak with children alone, we can also better influence their behavior because they don't have to divide their focus among people.

### **The Physical Environment**

Just as a person's emotional state can cause overstimulation, so can our surroundings. Have you ever walked into a messy

space and had an overwhelming urge to straighten it? A friend's house? A fellow teacher's desk? This compulsion comes from our need for order. Whereas clutter can create chaos, clean and orderly environments can create calm. This

*Just as a person's emotional state can cause overstimulation, so can our surroundings.*

does not mean we need sterile, minimalist spaces for our kids, but we should be aware of the physical environment so as not to overstimulate inadvertently.

## **DIRECT INSTRUCTION**

Though managing the environment is essential in helping ground children emotionally, our ultimate goal is to help them recognize their feelings and self-regulate. When doing so, we must remember that the younger children are, the less practice they have had dealing with their emotions. So just as with any other skill, kids need to be explicitly taught when it comes to managing their emotional states.

*...just as with any other skill, kids need to be explicitly taught when it comes to managing their emotional states.*

## **Identifying Feelings**

The first step in dealing with our feelings is recognizing and labeling them. We can help teach children this skill through language modeling:

*"Mrs. Johnson's feeling sad this morning."*

*"Tyrone, you look excited about going to the park."*

*"Rascal's shaking in her cage. She looks scared."*

When labeling the feelings, we also have an excellent opportunity to expose kids to rich language by continuously varying our word choice:

*“Mrs. Johnson’s feeling **down** this morning.”*

*“Tyrone, you look **enthusiastic** about going to the park.”*

*“Rascal’s shaking in her cage. She looks **frightened**.”*

We also learn how to identify feelings through seeing the facial expressions of others. In addition to modeling different emotions to kids, we should be providing them with ample interaction time with their peers. Increased face-to-face time gives the brain more opportunities to learn how to identify feelings in others.

In the classroom setting, labeling feelings can be a great morning ritual. Teachers can make a feelings wall with pictures of kids expressing different emotions. As students enter the classroom each morning, they are encouraged to put a clothespin with their name next to the emotion they are feeling.

## **Expressing Feelings**

Once we learn to identify our feelings, we must learn to manage and express them appropriately. This skill can also be taught through language modeling:

*“When Mrs. Judson is confused, it helps when she talks through things. Let’s all come to the carpet.”*

*“Mom is feeling tired. She’s going to rest for a little while.”*

This skill can also be taught through direct instruction. It’s important to teach a variety of strategies, so children have

options and can choose what works best for them. For example,

- Going to a calming area of the room
- Listening to music in a center
- Looking at a book
- Jumping on the class trampoline

No matter the strategy used, it is important to work with kids on expressing their feelings with their words. I love to use animals as a concrete way to help kids understand talking about their feelings:

*“When LaRoux gets scared, she barks loudly. She can’t talk, so that’s her way of telling us how she’s feeling. We are lucky that we can use our words.”*



The happy ending to this chapter is that LaRoux’s potty accidents, for the most part, have stopped. She’s also gotten much better about not “grabbing” people with her mouth. We believe this is because she has gotten older and has better impulse control. Another factor in her success is that her owners do a much better job fulfilling her need for emotional grounding.

Prior to LaRoux meeting new people, we get her alone, use a calm voice, remove distractions like toys, and focus her attention. By settling her proactively, we know we are increasing the likelihood she will be more successful in a new social setting.

## LESSON LEARNED

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# Emotions feed emotions.

Kids need to feel emotionally grounded. When they do, they feel safe—which positively impacts their feelings and, ultimately, their behaviors. Adults can help meet this need by modeling, managing the environment, and providing kids with direct instruction on how best to self-regulate their emotional states.