



Applied Ethologist Kim Brophey Discusses Trauma in Dogs, Ethology, and Why Dogs Need to Have Agency



Kim Brophey always enjoys any chance to spend quality time with her family dogs.

► **Your famous (perhaps infamous?) TEDx Talk turned the pet industry on its head. There aren't many TED Talks done by dog professionals. How did the talk come about? And did you anticipate or worry about how it would be received?**

We are near the University of North Carolina, Asheville, and they had been hosting TEDx events for a few years when they called and asked if I would be willing to present for their upcoming conference in 2018. The process of

going through it was actually really cool in terms of how they train you for your talk. The most terrifying bit was that you have to memorize it, which I didn't know when I agreed to do it. And then quickly, you find out that all TED talks, by definition, have to be memorized pretty much verbatim, because they approve the entire script as is and you're not allowed to take any liberties with that. I've done tons of public speaking, but never memorized a 20-minute presentation. That was a little terrifying, for sure. I had to go through the process of conditioning myself to remember it. I was very nervous about how it would be received because I was going out on a limb and saying something publicly on that type of a stage that hadn't been said before. And I was also totally exposing my own personal story and experience in a way I had never done before. Nobody knew about my own life story. I first wrote the TED talk without my story in it and then it felt like: "it's missing something. What's it missing? Oh, right. Your story." I had been looking at what makes a popular TED talk a lot. And consistently, the theme was that the person who's speaking shares their personal story and connection to whatever that material is. It was nerve-wracking. But it was also cathartic for me within my own personal journey with trauma, and in terms of coming full circle and really sticking my neck out for dogs.

► **At what age did you know you wanted to work with animals? How did you settle on applied ethology? It feels as though most people don't even know what ethology studies.**

You know, you wonder about neuroethology, which is epigenetic inheritance of meanings, perception, and orientations. We talk about how you can inherit the meanings and then strategies from prior generations, and that the experiences from our prior generations can influence us and who we are. I learned late in my life that my great, great, great grandfather was an ethologist, Raymond Ditmars. When I was tiny, I was obsessed with understanding nature. As soon as I was able to be out in the yard, I wanted to be outside with the snakes, the salamanders, the spiders, and the earthworms. In Atlanta at the time, the dogs were still loose, too, so I had all these interesting relationships with the dogs in the city that just lived in my neighborhood and would just show up and come around and hang out on their own, like floating relationships and experiences. And I felt a connection with nature that I didn't feel with the kind of modern urban reality and lifestyle. I didn't understand

a lot of cultural social norms and expectations and I felt frustrated by a lot of conventions. Everything about nature just made sense to me, and I felt at home with it. I was a little ethologist in the making, boundlessly curious about observing and understanding an animal's behavior in their natural environment and all things in the world. And I think dogs probably circumstantially became the kind of emphasis of my interest because I did grow up in a city. I had limited access to nature in other ways. If I could find a bird that had a broken wing in my front yard then it became my object of obsession, but it just didn't happen very much. But I had always had dogs and so they became kind of the bridge for me, which is why I ultimately ended up naming my company the Dog Door. I ended up wanting to really focus on that relationship between human and animal behavior. My degree in the Applied Relationship Between Human & Animal Behavior brought in that ecological piece, the evolution of animals, and also the relationship between humans and animals historically. It's studying specifically the intersection of the relationship between human and animal behavior in those species with which we have that



Helping your dog regain a sense of agency can be as simple as giving your dog space to “be” and do what they want to do.

level of intimacy, whether for good or for bad, including in laboratories, zoos, farms, and as companion animals—basically situations of captivity and domestication only. But there are such unique challenges and opportunities in those kinds of relationships. And it's just fascinating how things can build or completely fall apart at that crossroads.

► **You write in your book about how we humans have taken away agency for dogs, even to the extent of harming their genes as we took away their choice of a mating partner. What is the most important way we can give independence and agency to dogs?**

The number one answer for me, for all dogs, is providing true nature therapy without our intervention. What if that could literally be someone setting up a lawn chair in their fenced backyard and allowing the dog to do whatever they want to do in that space. We tend to have this idea that when we go out with our dog, we should be training them, or we should be throwing the ball or making sure they don't do this or that. We don't give them opportunities to just be and find where their own instincts and interaction with the signals in the environment take them. This is such a simple thing that is so undervalued. We've had this operative paradigm that's been so dominant in the dog world that is focused on taking them out and doing more behavior—more training, more training, more training—instead of getting away from all of the stimulus in a safe space where the dog has agency to interact with the environment. I think we do give dogs choices in the wrong way because we don't understand the nuances of what kinds of choices they can handle. I completely agree with the need to up the choice and agency quotient for our dogs overall, but I also think that people's well-intentioned idea of this is to simply follow their dogs on walks in active urban neighborhoods giving them agency to do whatever they want. Dogs can actually become very stressed and overwhelmed by that. I think continuing the discussion on when to give them that agency, and how to create it is important.

► **In our interview, you talked about trauma, both in humans and in dogs. You began your TEDx Talk referencing your own personal trauma that you experienced as a young person. How does trauma relate to dogs and how we work with them?**

I think a lot of our judgments on trauma are kind of erroneous, that it must be acute and physically devastating or in some way violent. And the truth is, there's so much psychological and emotional trauma that happens on a micro level that's very real. I think this is because people don't want to create space for hypersensitivity to things that they don't consider to be trauma and they don't want people to be "overdramatic." There's been this kind of dismissal. As a matter of fact, in the TEDx Talk comments, there were a lot of comments that speak to that phenomenon of belittling trauma, such as: "you're the very definition of a snowflake" and "what planet are you on." I'm sure you can imagine it. I think it's a kind of chronic conditioning of "less than"—mistreatment and abuse of power, manipulation, emotional blackmailing, and gaslighting. Gaslighting is one of those things that we are uncomfortable applying to our relationships with dogs. But we gaslight dogs all the time. "What do you mean? Why are you scared at the vet? He has cookies. He's your friend. Right?" Meanwhile, we're tricking them to take their temperature or administer vaccines in potentially traumatic ways. We just make ourselves untrustworthy, not because we mean to, but because we've been taught that dogs couldn't possibly be cognizant or sentient enough for it to matter. And that's so weird.

We also see trauma with rescued dogs. I started my whole career in rescue, and I actually believe—this is a horrifically difficult pill to swallow—but I think over 90% of dogs that end up in shelters in the first place have PTSD. I think the process of relinquishment, abandonment, and rehoming is, in itself, for most dogs as traumatic as it would be for a small child.



Even in the best, most caring shelter, a relinquished or abandoned dog is still going to have trauma from the experience.

► **Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the fate of modern dogs over the next 20 years? Why?**

If you had asked me not three years ago, I would have said I am probably naively optimistic. But if I'm being realistic, I was probably pessimistic. Now, however, with the last two years having occurred during COVID I feel more optimistic. I feel like there is an actual paradigm shift that's happening and the atmosphere within the dog world is qualitatively shifting toward this collaborative spirit, this interdisciplinary, supportive, curious, passionate, nonjudgmental sphere that I would have said wasn't possible, because frankly, it's a 180 from what my experience has been for most of my time. I do think the conversation can change and is changing.

We have to kind of continue to hold ourselves accountable to doing better and being respectful and ethical in how we proceed with each other in our dialogues and our collaboration, and hopefully, things will continue to move forward in that direction. There are a million connections that I've made that I know I wouldn't have made if it hadn't been for COVID. It opened everything up and gave us comfort that we all then developed with video chats and online interactions, having online conversations because we couldn't have in-person conversations. Having the rug pulled out from under us made us reevaluate some things that needed to be reevaluated.



Applied Ethologist and
Family Dog Mediator
Kim Brophey Discusses
How to Strengthen the
Human-Canine Bond
and Why It Is Crucial



Kim Brophey with her happy and well-adjusted family dogs in Asheville, North Carolina.

► **What contributed to creating the human-canine bond? Why do you feel it is so strong and unlike any other relationship we have with an animal (cats and horses are similar, but horses don't sleep in our beds and cats, well, they run their own lives it seems)?**

I think it's the unique evolutionary history between humans and dogs. I think we became inextricably connected in a way that probably was a bit similar for horses as they were similarly valuable to human existence and success. But then after a while with the advent of other modes of transportation, it just didn't continue in the same way. And it didn't have as many complicated layers to it, I think, as ultimately the relationship with dogs did. It would be really different if the horse lived in the house and if you were in the same social group all day, every day. I wonder what it would be like if I moved into the barn with the horse. How would our relationship be different?

Part of it is the fact that we became interdependent for access to resources literally 10,000–40,000 years ago and that changed how we survived. We needed each other in a way that was really unique evolutionarily, particularly for humans, as dogs opened up so many new possibilities for us in terms of things like hunting strategies, alarm systems, and resource protection. And then that diversified to so many other areas over the years, giving way to livestock management, pest control, and more. I think that fact that we brought them into our social group and even integrated them into our culture in a way was different from any other animal. We developed them genetically and behaviorally in a way constantly increased the load of that demand and therefore the potential for effective communication, understanding, and complex relationships. And I just think that it's been a very interesting and unique evolutionary story.

► **What are three ways humans can increase the bond with our dogs?**

Accept them and meet them where they are, with the L.E.G.S model being elemental to helping people do that. When we change our expectations, it then changes our experience in relationship with our dogs. I think that is the most critical moment. Of course, you're going to be frustrated if you're expecting things go a certain way that might not be realistic or possible. So, we have to back up, get humble, and find out where the dogs actually are and why they are there before we can move forward. And it's a game-changing piece.

The next one is to challenge yourself to abandon the cultural concepts of obedience and training and to explore the concept of "relationship." Relationships include mediation and conflict resolution—finding ways to dialogue and have more effective communication, then finding agreements as a necessary parent or guide for your dog in the modern world. The point being that you shouldn't just swallow the concept that dogs need to obey and must be trained exclusively to do so. Remember, for 99% of our 10,000- to 40,000-year history with dogs, there were no dog trainers. We were totally successful in our relationships between the two species without dog trainers. So, think about emphasizing relationship communication, dialogue, and agreements over obedience, conditioning, and training.

All our relationships have terms and many times there are unspoken terms. I trust that my husband's not going to go out and start romantic relationships with 50 other people, but those things need to be established and understood. Sometimes we have conflict only because we have different expectations and haven't created any clear agreement yet.

The last one is to talk to your dog as if you were raising a child. It changes so much about your dynamic, your behavior, your dog's experience with and trust in you, your facial expressions, body language, and gestures, etc. I think because we have this cultural idea that because dogs don't understand what we're saying, we don't talk

to them. If you didn't talk to a baby just because they didn't understand what you were saying, it would create learning dysfunctions and a lack of bonding. You've got to remember that dogs are a social species (like humans), and they need that sense of social referencing, dialogue, conversation, etc. Beyond that, they are also capable of learning to understand many words and phrases, not just the basic obedience commands. The more information we give them, the better off they're going to be. It increases their ability to predict and anticipate what's going to happen next because we're keeping them informed—and that really can lower anxiety and help with a lot of behavior problems.

► **What advice can you share for those dog owners and trainers who now fully understand the harm caused to dogs through a lack of knowledge and from blind adherence to only working with observable behaviors? How can we live with the guilt of our actions or inactions when it's affected dogs for generations?**

It's the same thing I tell my clients about behavioral euthanasia should it become necessary—you didn't ask to be in the situation any more than your dog did. We are dealing with the repercussions of choices that were made by our ancestors. We have a cultural structure and framework around dogs at this point that is not likely to change, so now we must work with what we have. And the most important thing is compassion for your dog and yourself in that process. Your ancestors may have hyper-manipulated and controlled animals but that wasn't your choice. Move on and do the best you can with what you have. Do as much damage control and as much compromising and mediation as you can to ensure that all parties' needs are met.

► **What are three gifts we can use our human intelligence for to give to our dogs to improve their lives?**

I think creativity is number one. That's the biggest thing that jumps out for me—be creative. Think outside the box. And that dovetails with using your critical thinking and not buying into any set ideology. That requires a willingness to challenge your belief systems. I think we should strive to use our human brain power for open-mindedness, creative problem solving, and critical thinking, which are kind of the enemies of ideology.