

Woman's Hour, radio 4. Friday 18th February 2011...

repeated in 'the best bits' Saturday 19th February 2011

I had an unusual phone call last week from a producer at radio 4...

"Do you think dogs should be allowed on the bed?" was the gist of the conversation and as a dog behaviourist who has had to deal with numerous cases of dogs becoming territorial over the bedroom and ultimately 'the bed' my response was a categorical "No"

I was then asked if I'd discuss this on Radio 4's Woman's Hour.

Another phone call a couple of days later and we started discussing the health issues of dogs in beds. Apparently they'd been a 'scare' article in the Daily Mail last month about someone catching the bubonic plague from a dog... "really?" was my response.

So that was it, a bit of research prior to the programme to check just what kind of health hazards are there in relation to dogs in beds apart from the icky stuff of pooh under nails and 'guests' in fur.

Here's what I found;

- Campylobacter is a notifiable disease and is transmitted from dogs with diarrhoea
- Did you know that if you swallow a dog flea you could get a tapeworm.... nope, me neither
- What about hookworms which dogs get... in humans they cause creeping eruptions under the skin called cutaneous larva migrans (skin larva movement); roundworm are worse and cause visceral larva migrans... yup larva moving in the organs
- Ticks can cause Lyme's disease and like to burrow themselves in the armpit or groin
- Hair can embed itself into your skin, travelling in through an open pore causing blood poisoning (this happened to me when I was in my early teens - a hair from my brother's German Shepherd started travelling up my bloodstream via the knuckle on my little finger)

Then there really is the yuck factor;

- Pooh under nails, of various species... my old lab had a real penchant for cat pooh and would delight in digging it up and wolfing it down.
- Rolling in who knows what, fox pooh, maggoty dead animals; a quick hose down in the garden will not remove it
- Dog being sick in the bed or having a season
- Fleas and ticks
- Hair
- And not to forget that dogs lick, lick and lick - themselves and anything else that smells interesting and us humans sure give off interesting smells in interesting places!

Okay, so this is all really common sense that most mums would think of when their kids (like mine) ask if the dog can sleep on the bed. But what about from a dog behaviourists point of view...

When I go to see people with their wayward dogs, some more wayward than others, I always start by saying that they (the client) are in charge of their own rules not me... if they want the dog on the bed then they want the dog on the bed, HOWEVER, what they've been doing so far isn't working with that particular dog otherwise they wouldn't have needed me and so we then go on to work our way through all of the things that they may be doing that in the dogs eyes makes it important... one of the top things is sleeping arrangements.

Dogs, like humans, are social hunters; that is they hunt in groups during daylight hours (or at least we used to anyway). As such dogs, like us, need a hierarchy of command, someone to make the decisions, call the shots and take responsibility. In our world it's Mam and Dad, teachers, police and so on. In the dog world it's the pack leaders or Mam and Dad.

The hierarchy within the pack is reasonably fluid with the exception of the very senior ranks and the whole 'establishment' process starts whilst the puppies are on the teat. From very early on the puppies learn that the strongest, most agile and canniest get the best teat, the best place to sleep and then the best position at the food bowl, in the sun, the best toy etc., and this is before we bring our puppy home!

Once puppy is home however, we spoil them and that's okay to a degree. Providing we give boundaries then all should be okay as the puppy matures into adolescence, however if we continue to spoil without any house rules then chaos can, and often does, ensue.

In relation to dogs on beds, the dog has already learned very early on that privileges are related to importance, or rank if you like; allowing a dog on a human bed is making that dog very important indeed.

Two things to bear in mind in relation to dogs on beds;

- In the animal kingdom, well that is the animal kingdom without the human animal, there are no such things as equals... one animal is always stronger or weaker than another, always more important or less important than another.
- Also in the animal kingdom, possession is the law... I have it therefore it's mine; if you have it it's yours. If you have it and I want it I need to decide if the object of my desire is worth putting myself at risk to get.

Now think about your dog on the bed; he's on it therefore it is his. By the very fact that he has such a huge privilege makes him a very important dog indeed.

More important than you? Possibly, and with some dogs most definitely.

If the dog is on the bed and you try to remove him or join him and he growls or tries to prevent you from doing what you want then he is trying to control the situation and his resource.... YOUR bed!

Not all dogs will challenge owners over beds but an awful lot do and out of that awful lot, many of them will persistently bite to get their own way.

As well as the icky stuff and the health hazards to think about letting your dog sleep with you, there's also the risk of affecting their behaviour and damaging your relationship.

So before you let your dog into your bedroom, let alone on your bed, think carefully about what you're communicating to your dog and try to put his needs before your own.

Following on from the discussion on Radio Four I received an email from Kathryn Blennerhassett the producer to say...

"Many many thanks for taking part in the discussion on Friday. [...] It was repeated in Saturday's programme which is the best items from the week. [...]"