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How  
Science-Based  
Parenting Can  
Transform Our  
Relationship  
with Dogs



# Tenderpaws

*Wendy Lyons Sunshine*

"... lots of positive, gentle methods for working effectively with dogs."

—Temple Grandin, author of *Animals Make Us Human*

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## Praise for *Tender paws*:

"*Tender Paws* will be especially helpful for people who are getting new puppies or adopting traumatized rescue dogs. This book offers lots of positive, gentle methods for working effectively with dogs."

—**Temple Grandin**, author of *Animals Make Us Human*  
and *Animals in Translation*

"I love this book! Not only will it help transform the relationship the reader has with their dog, but it has the potential to change how they relate to other humans and even with themselves. This is no ordinary training manual! *Tender Paws* gives an insight into the importance of understanding the individual's lived experience, with a heavy focus on safety (physical and emotional) and the importance of fostering secure social attachments. This book will support the reader to give their dogs the best gift of all—a voice! I highly recommend this book, and I know dogs everywhere will too."

—**Andrew Hale**, founder of Dog Centred Care

"I'm so glad Wendy Sunshine—a best-selling child development author—suddenly began to wonder about dogs. In her new book *Tender Paws*, she pulls off something extraordinary: an exploration into parenting and dog-raising techniques that is both wonderfully readable and fully grounded in well-cited science. The author focused her considerable research skills on the topic, and dozens of poignant case studies and examples of hard-won wisdom shared by thoughtful fellow travelers (including some famous names!) really give *Tender Paws* its powerful emotional punch. I'm so grateful this book now exists!"

—**Kathy Callahan**, author of *Welcoming Your Puppy from Planet Dog* and *101 Rescue Puppies*

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# *Tender* **paws**

*Wendy Lyons Sunshine*



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**To little ones,  
human and canine,  
who need an  
advocate**

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# contents

Introduction ..... 1

## PART ONE

### **Can We Parent a Dog?** 5

Chapter 1: My Puppy Problem ..... 7

Chapter 2: The Science of Family ..... 21

Chapter 3: The Meaning of Parenting ..... 31

## PART TWO

### **The Science and HEARTS of Parenting** 43

Chapter 4: HEARTS Principles ..... 45

Chapter 5: Parenting Styles ..... 91

Chapter 6: HEARTS and Parenting Styles to Guide Us ..... 105

## PART THREE

### **HEARTS-Friendly Practices** 115

Chapter 7: Consider Their Developmental Stage ..... 117

Chapter 8: Practice Attunement ..... 127

Chapter 9: Help Little Ones Feel Safe ..... 147

Chapter 10: Nurture at Every Opportunity .....	157
Chapter 11: Show Respect, Expect Respect .....	165
Chapter 12: Water the Seeds You Want to Grow.....	173
Chapter 13: Use Play Creatively .....	181
Chapter 14: Avoid a Head-On Collision.....	195
Chapter 15: Honor Their Talents .....	203
Chapter 16: Help Them Self-Regulate.....	209
Chapter 17: Set Everyone Up for Success .....	219

#### PART FOUR

### **HEARTS to the Rescue—Three Case Studies** 233

Chapter 18: Case Study 1—Duke and Dr. Rudy De Meester ...	235
Chapter 19: Case Study 2—High Performance Sports and Mr. Grin .....	243
Chapter 20: Case Study 3—Changing the Lens on Cooper .....	251

#### PART FIVE

### **Embracing HEARTS** 273

Chapter 21: Become a Detective of Unmet Needs.....	275
Chapter 22: Restore Balance .....	291
<b>Notes</b> .....	299
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	341
<b>About the Author</b> .....	343

## introduction

I NEVER EXPECTED to help write an award-winning, best-selling parenting book that's been translated into multiple languages and continues, more than a decade later, to be recommended by adoption agencies and child protective organizations across the country.

But luck was on my side when then-editor of the *Fort Worth Weekly* Gayle Reaves, asked me to write an article about child development expert Dr. Karyn Purvis, her mentor Dr. David Cross, and their groundbreaking work at Texas Christian University with struggling adopted children. The professors invited me to attend their "Hope Connection" camp, where at-risk kids ran sensory obstacle courses, participated in Theraplay sessions, and sat wide-eyed on the floor as Dr. Purvis blew bubbles, lit sparklers, and engaged with them playfully. Parents told me, damp-eyed, about the miraculously positive shifts that occurred as a result of their child's participation in the camp and through personal interactions with Dr. Purvis. Kids once thrown out of school for aggressive outbursts were now complimented by their teachers. Young children who were once bundles of defiance, unable to focus or learn, could now sit and practice their alphabet and numbers.



The professors yearned to help even more struggling families and asked me to partner on a book. During this process, I became their honorary graduate student. The professors personally tutored me in Dr. John Bowlby's attachment theory, the Ainsworth Strange Situation, Dr. Bruce Perry's work on trauma, stages of child development, neurobiology, and concepts of positive reinforcement. Karyn herself administered the Adult Attachment Inventory to me and explained how the findings played out in my own life. She and I spent hours together, me tapping on a laptop while she play-acted scenarios to demonstrate practical application of their approach.

This extraordinary experience gave me a glimpse of their wisdom, but I couldn't yet appreciate its full dimension and power. I had no experience in real-life parenting challenges—the frustration, the endless responsibility, the guesswork, the fear, the guilt, the power struggles. I remained blissfully unaware of these stresses until right around the time that *The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family* went to the publisher. And that's when my husband and I adopted a small, brown puppy.

A puppy of indeterminate lineage.

A puppy born behind a gas station.

A puppy taken from her mother and littermates too soon.

A puppy with worms and anemia.

A special-needs puppy.

My first puppy.

And I was in way over my head.

In short order, puppy training guides failed me. Nothing in their pages explained what to do with a scrambling, out-of-control bundle of teeth and claws. I would have sent the blasted creature back to

the shelter so that someone more qualified could raise her, but my husband refused.

Desperate for help and grasping at straws, I got a crazy idea.

Could a book written for struggling parents help me with a fanged, four-legged toddler? Could lessons in raising happy, well-adjusted kids transfer to a puppy?

On my very first try, *The Connected Child* transformed my relationship with her. From that point forward, I secretly used a parenting book as my compass for puppy-rearing. It helped me see my challenging puppy, not as a demon out to get me, but as an at-risk child struggling with invisible, unmet needs. Those needs were complicated by developmental challenges, neglect, abuse, or trauma, and I would need compassion, patience, and a therapeutic mindset to meet those needs.

Years afterward, when I began collaborating on a different parenting book (*Raising the Challenging Child: How to Minimize Meltdowns, Reduce Conflict, and Increase Cooperation*, with Karen Doyle Buckwalter and Debbie Reed of Chaddock), my husband and I happened to take home our next rescue dog, who had his own background of trauma. And sure enough, parenting wisdom again offered useful insights for our jittery new arrival.

Was this a lucky fluke, or did the seeming similarities between child-rearing and dog-rearing have a basis in science? To find out, I began reaching out to animal behavior experts—such as Temple Grandin, PhD, who affirmed that attachment mechanisms did indeed work across species—and other researchers, and I scoured scientific literature. I attended Kelley Bollen's dog behavior workshops at my local shelter and began attending specialized webinars

and conferences, reporting and blogging about dogs and people for PsychologyToday.com, and speaking with experts such as Suzanne Clothier and Denise Fenzi. I found my way to Kim Brophey's L.E.G.S. Applied Ethology Family Dog Mediation program and became part of the team at Positively, founded by progressive dog trainer Victoria Stilwell. The more I learned, the more I saw that advances in dog handling and research had close parallels in the fields of child development, trauma, and attachment psychology.

This book incorporates terminology from a cross section of disciplines and includes a variety of analogies and metaphors. My language choices will at times intentionally veer away from precise academic, medical, psychological, or industry definitions, but I will do my best to show where and how these concepts and practices fit together to benefit dogs of all types.

Whether your puppy or dog was rescued from a background of harm or deprivation or has developed perplexing behaviors, recognizing the hidden needs that drive behavior can make it easier to brainstorm creative solutions. It is my deepest hope that the insights shared here will help you and your dog thrive in your journey together.





PART ONE

# **Can We Parent a Dog?**

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## CHAPTER 1: **My Puppy Problem**

A FEW YEARS into our marriage, my husband decided that what our home needed—beyond the big-screen TV dominating our living room or the second rescue cat he'd convinced me to adopt—was a puppy.

Yes, a puppy.

Others might have greeted this prospect with delight or at least confident understanding of the next steps, but not me.

I had lived with easygoing grown dogs and enjoyed walking and caring for them, but I had never raised a puppy or infant of any kind and frankly was not eager to try. I was busy racing toward a work deadline, and if past experience with my night-owl husband and our distribution of cat box duties was any indication, the less glamorous, more hands-on aspects of puppy care would fall to me.

My protests slammed right up against Norm's sentimentality for his late beloved hound. The dog was long gone, but his likeness festooned my husband's office. There were images of Flash as a puppy in Norm's arms, as a teenager sprawled on a couch, as a mature basset with long ears draped across a field of Texas bluebonnets. I never really stood a chance.

Finally, I agreed to visit a breeder. We were welcomed by a pair of drooling basset hounds with plate-sized paws and yards of ears, eager to greet us. Outside on the back porch, we sidestepped yellow puddles and scattered brown piles to meet the pups. They were friendly and cute enough, but I kept thinking about those massive, drooling adults. So much slobber, and one false turn of a stout creature like that would torpedo my bad knee. We thanked the breeder and went on our way.

My husband took the rejection of his beloved breed in stride. If a puppy was involved, he was flexible. So we browsed possibilities, oohing and aahing at standard poodles and Wheaten terriers. Somehow, each time we took an interest, further research revealed that the breed had a reputation for killing cats, was prohibitively expensive, or both.

Keeping our cats safe added anxiety to the choice. I didn't intend to put little Sven or Gracie in harm's way. But we were at a loss for a clear breed winner, so decided to explore local shelters for a small, mixed-breed puppy—preferably something that would grow to less than thirty pounds to give my knee and the cats a fighting chance.

Visiting shelters near Dallas took a strong stomach. Harsh barking echoed the hallways. Antiseptic, musky smells enveloped us. Row after row of sad faces squinted in the dim hallways, many lethargic and indifferent, even earless, hulking survivors of the fighting ring. Some of the animals, penned together, began snarling and snapping at one another when I approached.

These visits were so depressing that Norm didn't have the heart to join me. It was like looking for a needle in a gloomy haystack. Then one day, I discovered a squirmy, dappled dachshund mix awaiting

release for adoption. Let out to meet me, she wriggled and licked my hand and rolled over in friendly greeting. Suddenly I was all in on the puppy adventure.

Norm and I awoke early the next morning and dashed out to be first in line to adopt her. On arrival, we learned someone else had beaten us to her.

Weeks later, Norm and I met a litter of strays. Their mother had fled when animal control came, and her puppies were being housed in a foster home instead of the city shelter to protect them from germs.

We entered a living room dominated by a pen and settled ourselves cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a riot of life.

Puppies—some black and fluffy, others brown and velvety—trotted, chased, and pounced among themselves, just out of reach. Norm and I made kissy noises and wiggled fingers, luring them to us, but they hardly even noticed.

At last, one finally trotted forward but veered away at the last second. Minutes ticked by. We sat, ignored, while the puppies wrestled and scrimmaged together. Finally, out of nowhere, a potato-sized, fuzzy brown lump appeared. It tottered and climbed—unbidden—into my husband's lap, curled up, and went to sleep.

Norm and I looked at each other. This creature was a deep caramel color with undistinguished features. She had a pleasing earthy odor, like truffles and toast.

We discussed the dozing puppy. She seemed mild mannered and reasonably small. Maybe twenty or thirty pounds full grown? Short-haired, probably wouldn't shed too much. She was nothing like her rowdy littermates, we decided. Plus, she had chosen us.

“Okay,” we told the foster parent, “we’ll take this one.”

The first clue that I was unprepared for what lay ahead arrived the following morning in the shape of Karyn Purvis, PhD, a child development professor from Texas Christian University. She set her laptop on my kitchen table, swung aside her long, gray hair, and knelt to greet the as-yet unnamed puppy.

She turned to me and asked, “Has she pooped yet?”

The question unnerved me. I mean, who arrives at another person’s home and inquires about bowel habits? I wasn’t sure I’d heard correctly.

“What?”

“Has she pooped yet? She’s so little, her system can’t work by itself. She needs her mama to lick her belly and help her go.”

“Oh, goodness. Now that you mention it, I don’t recall seeing—”

“Get me a warm washcloth and some olive oil, and I’ll show you what to do.”

Karyn lifted the puppy onto her lap and demonstrated how to stroke its round underside with a warm, moist cloth, mimicking what the mother would do by tongue. On its nose went a spot of oil, to be licked off and to ease internal machinery.

Lesson complete, Karyn—a newly minted PhD—and I went back to revising our manuscript. We were working on a book for families with at-risk adoptive kids, written in collaboration with Karyn’s mentor, David Cross. I smiled and thought, *Well, that’s a stroke of good luck. Not only does this woman have the magic touch with special-needs children “from hard places,” she’s a puppy expert too!*

The next morning, Karyn arrived carrying a giant tote. Out came a pack of swizzle rawhide chews for our puppy. Then two gigantic hand-me-down feeding bowls.

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