Excerpt Option 1 *For the Love of Dog, The Ultimate Relationship Guide – Observations, lessons, and wisdom to better understand our canine companions.* Written by Pilley Bianchi, Illustrated by Calum Heath, Foreword by Marc Bekoff

“There is one thing you must do to explore learning with your dog or any animal. Respect the other mind involved with you in the process.” ~ John W. Pilley Jr., Ph.D.

Many times, I hear “My dog doesn’t like to play with toys.”

Not so fast.

I had a friend who brought his new five-month-old rescue pit bull mix puppy to my house. He was a little concerned because she didn’t like to play, so I asked him how he played with her. His response was, “Well, I don’t know, we bought her all these toys and she’s just not interested in them.”

I immediately had two thoughts. First, was she sick? Second, this was so sad.

Ruthie was a large, floppy-eared, dark-brown puppy, with the sweetest chocolate eyes and a gentle spirit. She had no problem with eye contact and would wag her tail, but she was not an assertive dog.

I didn’t have any toys in my Brooklyn garden but I did have a pine cone, which I picked up and started tossing in the air. I’d drop it, kick it, pick it up and run with it, and toss it again, and sure enough, Ruthie was watching. The second time I dropped it, she raced for it too. I let her grab it and enthusiastically said, “Ruthie, you have pinecone! I want pinecone!”

The cat and mouse game began.

I kept repeating “pinecone,” and she was jumping, running, and chasing “pinecone” until I got worn out and we had to take a break. We did this a few more times, and not only had she unleashed her joy of play, but she had learned the name pinecone.

Her owner also discovered how to play with his dog.

But play is no joking matter. Learning should be fun, and my father’s research supports this philosophy—but it also supports the power of praise. When the student gets it right, let them know it over and over again. “Good dog!” is not just for pups; it’s for humans too, and the powers that play and praise hold are virtually limitless. The simple beauty of this duo packs a heavy punch.

The world has come to lovingly identify my father, John Pilley—Chaser’s teacher and research partner—as Pop-Pop. He was never self-conscious about losing his dignity and getting whimsical with Chaser. Serendipitously, Pop-Pop is an acronym for the Power of Play, the Power of Praise

The type of learning he created with Chaser stemmed from her being primed and ready to rock and roll. A bunch of ideas are built into this. First, there is the realization that dogs and all animals have emotional experiences as well as the physiological mechanisms to support them. Descartes was wrong. Animals are not empty, vacant machines.

Jaak Panksepp, a neuroscientist and psychobiologist, has devoted his life to studying the physiology of emotion in the animal brain, and just like us, they have pleasure and pain. He has even discovered that rats laugh, and that learning is about activating the pleasure side of the spectrum. Neurologically and scientifically speaking, play equals joy. By tapping into Chaser’s joy, we hit pay dirt. Correction—play dirt.

Equally important is understanding that the way we interact with dogs—positively or negatively—affects how they feel about specific situations. Dogs can feel excited and anticipate good stuff, especially when play is involved. They also display fear and stress when aversive methods are used. Research reveals that a relationship built on punishment creates extensive behavioral issues in dogs. The same as with humans: you get what you give.

Thus, for Chaser’s learning to take place, we needed to capitalize on pleasure and happiness, which for Chaser meant play.

The seemingly frivolous behavior of “play” actually plays a critical role in cementing our relationship with the dog, and in concert with praise, it builds confidence. Dogs learn to play as puppies, by themselves, with objects, and with one another. They play with people and even other species. We humans can spend hours watching dogs on social media who are engaged in play-based behavior that is so darn entertaining it’s addictive. And yet, play is just another day at the park for your dog. They create games like playing monkey in the middle with a beach ball, bouncing on the bed, chasing another dog around the yard, or chasing kids around the yard. They jump, leap, tug, run, and play so hard that their back legs can get ahead of their front, and they take a tumble—only to recover with a brief body shake to hit their reset button and start all over again. These haphazard and seemingly whimsical behaviors actually provide a critical role in our pup’s development.

From the moment we brought Chaser home, she loved playing with toys. To describe her as “a player” is an understatement. If an object was allowed in her mouth for her to shake, rattle, and roll, then it was her favorite toy. But there was an important hitch. It was her favorite toy only if someone was playing with her. A playmate to toss, catch, chase, or hide the toy. While some dogs play independently, Chaser never played by herself.

Channeling her innate instinct to play was literally a gold mine in teaching Chaser human language. Seeing her with her huge pile of toys seems incongruous with serious scientific research, but it’s actually not as silly as it seems. Play literally fast-tracks learning, in humans and animals. Play deepens our bond, builds confidence, and makes learning fun. And if we are having fun, we are more likely to repeat a behavior, which brings us full circle to repetition, which is mandatory for mastering anything in life. Who, other than children, have such a high capacity and joy for playful repetition? It’s dogs.

 Play is not only a powerful learning tool; a playing dog means a happy dog and cuts down on fear and anxiety. It’s also critical in building our connection. A frolicking pup is a happy pup, and we have found that dogs don’t satiate on play or praise, which can be much less distracting than treats. And cheaper.

Play feels good and is sometimes an activity that dog lovers take for granted and it’s certainly an activity that has stumped animal behavior researchers for decades. While animals have developed specific behaviors for survival, play is different. It often consists of large, vibrant, embellished movements that in the wild could easily attract the attention of predators. And because play is so acrobatic and animated, even if it doesn’t attract a predator, it’s certainly not conserving energy. Precious energy that an animal might need to survive in extreme conditions. For reasons like these, researchers studying animal behavior have had a difficult time understanding *why* animals play. But let’s cut through the scientific jargon: the primary reason is that it feels good.

To this, Chaser would wholeheartedly agree. Play in dogs is notable because they play into adulthood. While it typically peaks in young animals, in some species, humans included, play can persist into adulthood, which John Pilley personally found extremely rewarding in the form of kayaking, windsurfing, and biking into his late eighties. And most importantly, playing with his dog.

Play enables us to be in the moment of joy.

The most valuable takeaway is don’t be afraid to get goofy and silly. Play becomes more valuable to your dog when the two of you are interacting. This is also how you can begin to teach verbs independently from nouns by saying “catch pinecone,” “find pinecone,” “take pinecone.” So many times, we speak gibberish to our pets and this is a fantastic opportunity to not only strengthen your bond but capitalize on everyday communication.

On a final note, play is also the same technique used with the working dogs we marvel at: the courageous heroes who fly under the radar in battle and catastrophic rescues, who sniff out bad guys, who aid in the search for the dead and for the really dead in forensic archaeology.

It’s not treats, punishment, or obedience; it’s play and positive reinforcement.

Praise be to dog.