

Canine Temperament

Part IV

I trust you all had a very Happy Christmas and that you will have every success with your dogs throughout this year of 2009. Over the next few months I wish to continue my articles on canine temperament. This month is about fear in dogs which is described under the four following headings.

Nervousness

This is really a mental ailment and nothing can be done about it. It can be inherited, it can be the aftermath of distemper and; it can be the result of the animal being mistreated or of it having lived in a very restricted environment from puppy hood. Fortunately, there are not many truly nervous dogs. The most common signs are as follows: the dog's tail being tucked tightly under its belly; ears held back tight; its whole body becomes extremely tense; it trembles when approached and moves in a cringing way; it darts from one place to another—in fact it looks most unhappy. Some very nervous dogs scream when handled or pull frantically away when put on a leash. I have always been of the opinion that the kindest thing to do in extreme cases of nervousness is to have the dog painlessly destroyed by a veterinarian. On no account should it be used for breeding.

Suspicion

This type of fear is natural in any dog and must not be confused with nervousness. Provided the dog has been well conditioned during puppy hood, you should have no problems with this. However, you should always be ready to accept that your dog may show signs of suspicion when it meets someone or something very unusual. When and if this occurs you should immediately take steps to coax and support your dog to overcome this suspicion. If you don't, your dog is likely to be suspicious of that thing on future occasions and or similar things it meets.

Early conditioning and socialisation is vitally important in rearing a puppy. If this were not done, it becomes extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to recoup that time later. That is why the puppy walking of guide dogs, police dogs, customs dogs and other working dogs is so important. Puppies should be taken out within a few days of being placed in puppy walkers' homes, provided each puppy has received its first inoculation to give it immediate cover. I have seen dogs kept within home premises for six months or more, and then when they have been taken out into the outside world, they show high degrees of suspicion. Breeders and purchasers of their puppies need to pay particular attention to this.

To prevent suspicion occurring or to help the puppy overcome this type of fear, it is so important for the handler to communicate by voice to assure and re-assure the puppy that nothing will harm it. When using the voice you are giving support and encouragement it needs. You need to be aware of how your dog views things at its low level. Interestingly, if you bend down you will see that the strange object, to which the puppy has shown suspicion, looks quite different from when you viewed it standing up. One weekend several years ago, my neighbour placed a row of long logs along the edge of our street's footpath to retain his flowerbed. On the Monday two young dogs brought to me for training barked suspiciously at one of those logs. When I viewed it at their short height, I could see that it looked just like a cat lying down and two pointed pieces coming out of the log looked like the erect ears of a cat. During the next few months several more dogs reacted in the same way. I explained this to the handlers and showed them how to talk to and stroke the log, letting their dogs out on the full length of the leash. The dogs, thinking they were missing out on something, gradually approached to investigate. When they found it was just a log, but not a cat as they first thought, their tails wagged and they were happy. Suspicion had been overcome. Some time later, when ivy had grown over the logs, no new dogs showed suspicion at that place. [For more reading about this account, and others like it, see Dog Training – Part XV, January 2008. I thank the VCA for kindly placing all my articles on its website.]

Sound Shyness

This trait is also known as gun shyness. It is either an inherited trait or one that has been acquired because the dog has been subjected to frequent noises over a period of time. If the dog has more than a small degree of it, it is virtually impossible to cure. If a dog has a small degree of sound shyness, there is always a slim chance of curing it by conditioning the dog to mild noises at first. This must be done very carefully and over a long period of time.

When dogs are offered to guide dog training centres throughout the world, one of the initial tests is to see how each dog responds to the sound of a blank cartridge being fired from a starter's pistol. If any dog were to show fear of this sharp sound, which is very much like a car back-firing, it would be unacceptable and no further tests in the assessment would be carried out.

So, having passed all the necessary tests, the dog is accepted, trained for several months by the trainer and later trained with a blind person. I well remember most guide dogs, which had to be with their owners in their places of work, like noisy factories, settled into their daily routine extremely well. But a few guide dogs started to develop sound shyness over a period of time because of noisy environments. In such cases special arrangements were made so that the guide dogs were comfortably housed away from the sources of loud machinery. Taking that precaution prevented the dogs becoming sound shy.

Anxiety

This is a type of fear, one which is the result of a dog becoming very concerned due to some stressful situation. It is quite unlike the other three forms of fear. The most obvious symptom displayed is when the dog pants very rapidly, even though the day may be cool and the dog has not been running around. Other signs seen can be that the dog scratches and bites itself, paces around the house looking most uncomfortable, is on edge all the time and not relaxed as it should be. Anxiety often occurs when the dog has had a most unfortunate and unpleasant experience, or has lived in a home where there is much human tension. When this tension is eliminated, the dog often returns to its normal self.

I recall a case of a guide dog developing anxiety after some time of working with a blind man most successfully. At first it was not understood why the dog displayed anxiety. Later, it was learned that there was great tension between the man and his wife. Finally, she left never to return again and divorce proceedings took place. From the time of the separation, the guide dog thankfully reverted to its normal self and never suffered from anxiety again.

Our dogs have an uncanny way of sensing all kinds of stress which we, as humans, may unfortunately have. Over the years I have had many dog owners come to me for a consultation because their dogs have suddenly acted in peculiar ways, suffered from anxiety and, for no apparent reason, have changed completely. They have passed all veterinary examinations extremely well, and from all outward appearances are physically fit and are eating well. Having been told when the dog's peculiar behaviour started, I then ask the owners if they would mind if I were to ask them a number of personal questions which would be received in confidence. I have always found that they are most willing to do so. I ask them if they can recall anything of a significant nature which happened at the time their dog started to be stressed. Was there bereavement in the family? Did any member of the family suffer an illness? Had there been an upheaval of any kind at home or at work? After so many questions they finally come up with the answer. To give one example a husband and wife explained that her father lived in a grandfather flat at the rear of their house. One day he suffered a stroke and was admitted to hospital. Naturally, the whole family were under extreme stress. They had no idea that their stress was being picked up by their German Shepherd dog that was nearly three years old at that time. They had had him since he was eight weeks of age and he had always been a most obedient and happy dog. When I explained how and why their dog had become stressed, the young couple were greatly relieved. It was quite a revelation to them.

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