

## **Canine Temperament**

### **Part V**

This month I wish to write about the most feared temperamental characteristic in dogs – aggression. There are so many forms of this bad and unacceptable trait, so in this article I have chosen to write about aggression towards other animals and pure aggression towards people.

#### **Animal Aggression**

Basically, dogs can be either fighters or chasers and sometimes both. Those are the ways dogs display their aggression, but let's look at the initial causes of those unwanted traits. More often than not they are because the dogs have not been socialised properly with dogs and other animals during their puppy hood. In many cases the aggression quickly develops if owners or handlers have not corrected the puppies as soon as the first signs of aggression appeared.

Most puppies are purchased at about eight weeks of age, regarded as the ideal time. But if they happen to stay for a few more weeks with their mother and have even a little potential aggression, some may turn aggressive to others in the litter. However, if this were to happen the mother would instinctively and immediately correct the culprits by taking hold of each puppy by the scruff of the neck, give it an appropriate corrective shake, to which the puppy would give a quick scream, and let go of it and just stand there as if nothing had happened. The puppy would instinctively respect her and mingle around its mother's front legs in a very apologetic manner. It would not run away from her nor attack its litter mate again. If it did, she would correct it again.

I will always remember a particular case of two male German Shepherds, nearly four months of age and from the same litter, that tried to attack each other every time their new owners brought them to the training session. Unfortunately, the respective owners had no idea how to correct the aggression. When brought to me I watched how aggressive they were at that young age and how the handlers kept them on short tight leads and yelled, "No! No! No!" Just saying those words, of course, was futile. I then stepped in and imitated what the dogs' mother would have done. I quickly seized hold of each one by the scruff of the neck, said, "No!" in a stern tone of voice and shook both of them simultaneously. They got such a surprise. I put them down and released them and there was no more trouble. Naturally, both handlers learned much from what they had just seen. They and others in the large class could see that, if the appropriate corrections are given in the early stages of puppy hood, good and everlasting results would be achieved. I further advised that the moment a puppy showed any sign of unwanted behaviour, the stern word, "No" should be given immediately as a warning to prevent any possible aggression. Any puppy, on hearing that corrective word, would then expect the corrective shake and would, therefore, show instant respect for the owner's authority and behave itself. Immediately the puppy has shown that respect, quiet and slow vocal praise should be given.

Generally speaking dogs will fight over food, social status and sexual rivalry. These three situations will bring out this instinctive animal aggression which, it is believed, always happened when dogs lived in their wild state. Dog owners and handlers must take all necessary steps to prevent this bad and dangerous trait developing, because if the aggression becomes firmly established in the dog, it is very hard to cure. So, correct immediately it starts.

A few years ago, I was exercising a Golden Retriever in a local park, when suddenly a Great Dane appeared from behind some trees and came towards him. Now it so happened that I knew that that particular Great Dane had an aggressive nature towards other dogs. The Retriever, which would do a brilliant recall, stood still as the Great Dane approached quite close. I knew that if I called the Retriever he would have obeyed, but I also knew that the Great Dane, who was only about four metres from him, would have quickly pounced on him from behind. So I considered it best to keep quite still and let them meet in their own time. The situation was extremely tense, but it would have been foolish to do anything which might have sparked off a fight. Then the owner of the Great Dane emerged from the trees on the far side, saw the two dogs sniffing each other, and said, "It's OK, I'll

just pull my Great Dane away”. I shouted to her, “Please stay where you are! If you take hold of your dog or even go near him you’ll without doubt promote a fight.” We kept quite still and waited patiently and after about five minutes the two dogs started to ignore each other and took to sniffing the ground. When there was about 20 metres between them, I said to the lady, “Now very quietly call your dog and walk backwards, while I do the same with the Retriever. She carried out my advice and all was well. It was a tense situation while it lasted. In that particular situation it would be unwise to call the dogs until the tense meeting was over. Even then handlers should exercise great calmness and call their dogs quietly.

This should give readers some idea of the different types of aggression and the many ways in which they can be caused and promoted. While a few of them can be cured, especially if they are caught in their early stages, others I regret to say cannot. Thankfully, wise and responsible dog owners take the most sensible step and have such dangerous dogs destroyed. Regrettably, it is the irresponsible dog owners who decide to live with the problem. At least they admit that their dogs are dangerous, but it is very sad that they should have the constant worry that one day their dogs may cause grievous bodily and mental harm to people whom they attack.

### **Pure Aggression**

When a dog shows this type of aggression towards people it is using its means of defence. All dogs have a means of defence ranging from attack to retreat. A dog which uses the attack method regards all people, with the exception of its owner and others who live in the same house, as the enemy. The ideal dog is one who lies mid-way in this range. That is, one who will neither attack nor retreat, but who is even tempered with everyone.

What are the causes of pure aggression? They are many and varied, but generally they stem from the dog having had a bad or most uncomfortable experience with particular persons who have teased or threatened it. Later, the dog may show aggression towards others like them, or when it finds itself in similar places and situations.

Not so long ago, I visited a veterinarian and as we chatted about various topics in his small consultation room, he told me that a large dog attacked him in that same room, and asked me why I thought the dog had done it, because it had not shown aggression when it came into the waiting room to meet the receptionist. So, I asked him to give me all the details. Apparently, he was finishing some work in another room, and his receptionist conducted the owner with dog into the consultation room, saying that the vet would not be long and shut the door. A few minutes later the vet entered through the door, and went straight up to the dog, whereupon the dog lunged to attack.

Standing in that small room, it was very easy for me to imagine and to know why it happened. I explained that as he suddenly came through the door and up to the dog, the dog felt threatened. Because the dog could not retreat in that small room he took the remaining course of defence — attack. I then continued to explain as to how the meeting should have been conducted. The veterinarian should have been in the consultation room and then asked his receptionist to bring the owner and dog in to see him. By doing it that way, the dog would be making the approach instead of being approached in that small room, where it was virtually being cornered and therefore became defensive. However, all credit to the veterinarian for he understood everything I explained and realised why and how the unfortunate incident happened. “It all makes sense,” he said, and thanked me for enlightening him as to how the dog’s mind worked in that particular situation and that in future he would always keep that procedure in mind.

Next month, I would like to talk to you about protective aggression and apprehensive aggression, which is also known as nervous aggression. They will be followed by: rare types of aggression, and jealousy. Till then, enjoy your dogs.

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