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COURTEOUS CANINE, Inc.
Dog School and Doggie Gym!

Defensive Behaviors toward Dogs

Dogs are People Too

Not all dogs share the same personalities. Some dogs do not enjoy the company of other dogs and may respond defensively when they see other dogs. The reasons as to why some dogs dislike other dogs may vary but the outcome is the same, these dogs have decided the best defense is a good offense.

Your trainer will work with you to develop a behavior modification plan for your dog. An important part of that plan is to communicate what is working and what is not working, so that adjustments can be made. Behavior modification changes behavior, not personality, so while you may be able to train your dog to be calm around other dogs, he may still not really like some of them.

Behavior Modification

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Triggers

All behaviors have triggers, some of which are obvious to anyone. A dog approaches on the horizon and the defensive dog explodes in an extensive display of barking and lunging. Sometimes the triggers are harder to detect and require the assistance of a professional trainer to be uncovered. Other times still the triggers are truly invisible to all. Dogs that have invisible triggers are extremely dangerous. If your dog has invisible triggers, it is recommended to have a vet with a special interest in behavior evaluate your dog for possible medication (see medication handout for more info).

Leash

When a dog is suffering from defensive behaviors the leash can be a useful tool or it can become a trigger for unwanted behavior. A leash functions similarly to a human grabbing your arm and pulling you by it. If you and another person are walking down a street and suddenly the other person grabs your arm and pulls you, you are likely to be alarmed. The leash functions in a similar way. If you walk your dog and suddenly tighten your leash, it can trigger fearful behavior in your dog which is likely to look like barking and lunging.

Work to keep the leash loose if another dog is near by. Tightening the leash is likely to trigger the very behavior we are working to prevent. If a loose dog approaches, carry a can of citronella spray with you (available at www.premierpet.com) and spray the approaching dog with this harmless spray. In almost all cases the spray will deter the dog from continuing to approach you and your dog. If the dog continues to approach pick up your dog. If your dog is too large to pick up drop on the ground and wrap yourself around your dog. Running away from a dog that is being aggressive is dangerous as it may trigger predatory aggression. High pitched screaming can also trigger predatory aggression. Always notify Animal Services when frightened by an off leash dog!

Cornering

Just as a tight leash can trigger unwanted behavior, cornering, tethering and crating can cause the same. *****Never***** tether your dog that is defensive with people. This is extremely dangerous. Tethering in a training situation is acceptable for dogs that are not defensive toward people but for dogs that have issues with other dogs, tethering is extremely dangerous. When you tether a dog they can not escape whatever other being that approaches them. For dogs that are defensive this can cause them to escalate their aggression and become dangerous. Work to protect your dog from what triggers her defensiveness, thereby deepening your bond and helping your dog rehearse success.

If you have a dog that is defensive around other dogs and you need to crate her, create a buffer area around that crate that no other dogs can approach. Sometimes a feeling of safety can be created simply by covering the crate.

Some dogs feel cornered and become defensive even if other dogs make eye contact with them. Teach your dog to maintain eye contact with you to decrease the odds of your dog noticing that another dog may be staring at her (see Attention Handout).

Calming Cap

Another great tool for a dog that is worried about other dogs is the calming cap. This tool slips over your dog's head covering her eyes. You help your dog get used to the calming cap gradually and you reinforce her for calm when she is wearing it. Gradually you can use it in situations where your dog will see other dogs. Examples would be the vet's office, a group class at your dog school or at a local park.

Your dog is very vulnerable when wearing the calming cap. It is extremely important that your dog have zero bad experiences while wearing the cap. If you have used the cap to help the dog wait in the waiting room at the vet's, remove the cap prior to walking the dog into the exam room. If you are at a group class or park, be prepared to physically wrap yourself around your dog wearing a calming cap if another dog accidentally approaches. The calming cap is available at www.premierpet.com.

Gentle Leader

If your dog behaves defensively around other dogs the ideal tool is the Gentle Leader. If your dog does not like wearing the Gentle Leader, keep telling yourself it is better she wear something she doesn't like than you get fined or sued because your dog barked and lunged at another dog. In many counties your dog will be cited as a dangerous dog if she barks at another dog. The Gentle Leader is available at www.gentleleader.com.

Remedial Socialization

Some dogs that show defensive behaviors toward other dogs may actually want to play with dogs but do not know how. Most of the time this is not the case. Many dogs become defensive after being bitten by another dog and for some dogs it only takes one bad experience to make the decision that they are no longer interested in any other dogs. If your instructor decides it is appropriate, you may be asked to attempt a remedial socialization program. The first step in this is to assess how your dog behaves around a set of stuffed dogs. If the dog is able to work through her aggression with the stuffed dogs, a small real dog may be brought into the session.

Counter Conditioning

The key to modifying your dog's defensive reaction is to help her understand that the very thing that she fears is actually a wonderful thing. The way to accomplish this is to expose your dog to being near another dog in a way that she can handle. Maybe the other dog is behind a barrier, or maybe the defensive dog is behind a barrier. Your trainer will guide you in finding your dog's success point. Now the idea is a simple one, feed and play with your dog while she is successful and the trigger is present. Remove the trigger and the feeding and playing stops. Your dog will learn to want the trigger to be present because she is learning that it means food and play for her.

Desensitization

Once you have been successful counter conditioning your dog's triggers you can raise the bar. If the first step was that the other dog was across the room behind a barrier, you can now move the dog and the barrier a tiny bit closer. The single most important thing to understand in this process is that the pace of the desensitization is set by the dog. You **MUST** avoid failures. Any failures indicate a failure in the training plan. We want the dog to learn to succeed **NOT** learn to fail. Success at every level of exposure is the single most important factor to this process succeeding.

Flooding Horror

Some misguided individuals recommend that a dog be exposed to triggers in a frightening and forceful way. In these cases the dog is held down while the trigger is pressed against their body. This usually causes dogs to become so overwhelmed with fear that they shut down. This shutting down then appears to be evidence that the dog has learned to happily accept the scary thing. This most likely is not the case. Much more likely, the dog will become **MORE** fearful of both the trigger **AND OF THE PERSON WHO FORCED THE TRIGGER TO BE NEAR HER**. Do not flood your dog with more than she can handle. Build your dog's confidence by helping her obtain and maintain success in her training.

Radar

During the process of your dog learning to accept the presence of other dogs, you will notice that there is a specific distance that will help your dog maintain calm behavior. You will also notice that if the trigger comes closer than that specific distance, your dog will growl, bark and/or lunge. Give that distance a number (i.e. 5-feet) and work to keep the trigger at least that far away from your dog. Do whatever you have to so you can prevent the trigger from getting too close. If you do this with a nearly perfect success rate your dog will bond with you very deeply and it will do a great deal to prevent your dog from behaving defensively. Your dog will have learned that you are handling things for her, and that she isn't required to behave defensively. When working your defensive dog you must be focused on your dog and on her radar distance of safety at all times. At all times, 100% of your focus is on your dog. No conversations with other people and no taking your eyes off your dog. If you need to talk with someone put your dog up.

Breeding

Never breed a dog that is defensive toward other dogs. There is significant evidence that there is a link between aggressive behaviors and genetics. Breeders who knowingly breed dogs that are defensive toward dogs are likely to be sued in the future.

Caution

Behavior modification can guarantee nothing. Trainers who guarantee behavior modification are unethical since behavior is influenced by many factors that no one can control, such as genetics, biochemistry and medical conditions. If your dog has behaved defensively toward other dogs, the only safe thing is to assume that your dog will have a life long problem. There is no cure for defensive behaviors. Defensive behaviors can be improved but never cured.

Recommended Reading

The Canine Aggression Workbook by James O'Heare www.Dogwise.com

Working with Challenging Dogs by Dee Ganley www.DeesDogs.com

How To Right a Dog Gone Wrong by Pamela S. Dennison www.Dogwise.com

Happy Training,

The Staff of Courteous Canine, Inc.