

Take Care When Training Aggressive Dogs

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Friday, 11 January 2008
Last Updated Friday, 11 September 2009

Many pet owners are struggling with some questions and concerns about how to deal with dogs' aggressive behaviors. Please read this article first.

[Note: This dog is wearing a leather basket muzzle for protection. Click the "read more" red text just below for the rest of the article.]

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I will try once again very gently to explain that the use of pain on aggressive dogs is harmful. By pain, I mean physical punishment through the use of choke collars, prong collars, electronic training devices, etc. Many, but not all, trainers who use pain may have the very sincere belief that a dog that fails to respond instantly to a spoken command is being defiant, or some such thing -- you know, defying authority like a criminal.

[Note: This dog is wearing a leather basket muzzle for protection.]

The trainers who use such coercive methods, though, are not basing their training methods upon knowledge about some of the causes of aggressive behaviors in dogs, nor, for instance, upon information from the board-certified veterinary behaviorists who specialize in diagnosing and treating dogs' serious behavior problems.

Many of us have learned through our studies to understand aggressive behaviors in dogs. Very often the dogs that

exhibit aggressive behaviors are relinquished by their owners because they're unmanageable; thus, many of the aggressive dogs you'll hear about are rescue cases or dogs newly adopted from rescue groups.

When we take any dog, a young puppy or an adult dog, into our home, it's a prisoner in a way. People expect it to conform to human ways so that it may live with us and behave in a socially acceptable manner. What's sometimes missing in this equation is an understanding of the dog itself, as a species. Surely when we decide to bring another species into our homes, we have an obligation to try to understand it.

The Aggressive Behaviors in Dogs group, originally called the AB-list, was begun in 1996 and later changed its name to the Agbeh group; it's located at Yahoo Groups.

We've been trying to help people understand that many traditional trainers may give dogs only a few choices: the dogs may comply with instruction to do something, or they may refuse. When an owner confronts a dog about the refusal, call it defiance, if you will, the dog has still fewer choices available to it. Now we're getting into a dog's emotional state.

When confronted by an angry owner:

(1.) The dog may do what is asked, if the dog understands how to do what is asked, if it has been taught first what to do; if it has received a sufficient number of repetitions of the lesson, and each successful trial was rewarded to reinforce that desired behavior, and if the dog has been taught sufficiently in many different locations so that the lesson has become very well generalized; for only then may we say that the dog has learned the behavior that's now requested.

(2.) It may attempt to leave, to flee, to run in the other direction, away from the angry owner. We call that the Flight response;

(3.) It may freeze in place, doing nothing. That's a type of learned helplessness; that is, helplessness on the part of the dog that is a learned behavior from its own experiences.

(4.) It may fight back to protect itself from harm. That defensiveness is called the Fight response

Fighting back may take several forms. First, the dog may curl a lip, and then it may give a little warning, "Grrr." Not really a growl, more like rumble sound under its breath. That's a warning message to communicate, "I'm uncomfortable. Please don't do that."

If the owner persists, say with a harmful leash correction, inflicting pain to the dog, the dog may "Grrr" again, or it may

attempt to leave (flight response), to put distance between itself and the cause of the pain.

Or it may growl, giving a firm warning to stop; it may even lunge and attempt to nip and give an inhibited bite. Inhibited bite means not with the full bite force of which the dog is capable. Note that the dog is reacting to protect itself, not to harm anyone. Its behavior is inhibited. It is reacting in this way in an effort to stop the pain and abuse inflicted upon it. That's self-defensive aggression.

The owner may realize that the dog is uncomfortable, but the owner may not understand that the leash correction causes pain, however minor or severe the pain may be. The owner may repeat the command and give a small but sharp leash correction again. It is the owner who is escalating the aggression.

Use of physical corrections is well-ingrained in our society as a whole. We have such a history. America is a very punishment-oriented society. That's not a criticism I'm making, but rather an observation. We need to be aware of we tend to react with physical punishment, or not. Among some trainers, the term use is "giving corrections." That's not what this article advocates. Please continue.

A more impatient owner may repeat the command and while doing so, yell the command and give a harsher leash correction: an application of severe physical punishment.

At that point, the dog may give up, slide to the ground, lie on its side and begin to roll over partly onto its back in the submissive posture. That posture in dog language means: "I am not fighting you; I am no threat to you." All canines honor that canine gesture, for they have a body language of communication. They honor it by backing off, backing away.

But the humans who do not understand the canine species may not honor that canine body language.

The owner may ask the dog to sit, but instead the dog may lie down on the ground and roll over partially onto its back. So the owner who wishes to enforce the command "Sit," may become insistent and angry. In response to his own anger, the owner receives an adrenaline rush and may no longer respond in a totally rational manner. Instead, the owner may become a bit out-of-control and react angrily and administer a large harsh physical punishment to the dog. Some people are so accustomed to abusing dogs that they do so habitually, without even feeling rage.

We had seen such a post in the Agbeh group, a news report about a dog day-care and training facility in which the trainer performed on videotape what was called "an escalated leash correction." Here's what the descriptive term meant. The trainer pulled tight on the leash attached to the dog's chain collar, called "stringing it up," sufficient that the dog's front paws could no longer reach the floor, paused for a while and then raised the leash higher and swung the dog around angrily to the heel position, the dog howling in pain and fright for the full 18 seconds or more. That's what the videotape proved: 18 seconds. When such a dog is actually lifted up by its chain collar so that its hind feet no longer touch the ground, even that abuse has a name; it's called "helicoptering" a dog.

Subsequently, that trainer was arrested for cruelty to animals. The USDA vacated the kennel license; the facility has been closed down. Such abusive individuals not only harm animals; they also give dog-training a terrible reputation.

A member of this group, a lady who served as group moderator for several years, had previously taken her own dog to that facility for day care, before the abuse was public knowledge. Her own dog suffered a laceration to the throat and severe tracheal damage.

Yet that escalated leash correction may be performed in some dog training classes.

Yes, people have been training dogs harshly with the application of physical punishment for well over sixty years in America and in other countries as well. Possibly you've known about the history of dog training from the military model. Many people have decried "traditional" training methods.

I differ somewhat because I had different experiences. I attended some traditional dog training classes in the early 1980s, but they were much more humane, new handlers always being taught to teach the dog step by step. Emphasis was on teaching from the dog's point of view, on helping a dog to learn.

Nonetheless, what I described above, about the dog suffering physical trauma and severe injury is just one example of harsh training methods. What are the results of such training? Over time, the human-canine bond of trust and communication is broken; the dogs become more defensive-aggressive toward humans. To repair such dogs or to prevent such methods, we need a new model for teaching them, a model which understands dogs' aggressive behaviors and then uses intervention strategies for a sound behavior program to bring about the desired changes.

[This dog is exhibiting predatory aggression.]

I do not recommend use of physical punishment, use of chain collars, use of prong collars, and use of electronic correction collar devices when working with aggressive dogs, or with any dogs, because of the unwanted side effects, the pain from physical punishment bringing about an escalation of defensive-aggression.

Pain and punishment do not serve to lessen dogs' tensions but rather to increase them.

A dog cannot learn simple obedience commands if its brain is responding to pain, nor if the dog fears more pain and punishment. But such a dog can react; it can react in a more dangerous way. Some dogs have been so abused that they have lost all trust in humans. We can understand that very sad outcome.

Here we strive to teach people some much more effective ways to resolve dogs' behavior problems without inflicting physical punishment.

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citations, go to

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