

Dealing with Fear Aggression

Contributed by Barbara Brill
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This short article is by Mary McCready, an experienced dog owner/trainer who rehabilitates many dogs. In her regular life, she's a cognitive psychologist. We're grateful to her for the perspectives and clarity she has brought to our understanding. BDB.

I believe a leadership program, known by many names such as Nothing in Life is Free, has been fundamental to my rehabilitation of fear aggressive dogs, my own and others. Without it, you are working with one hand tied in desensitization efforts. I believe it is the foundation upon which desensitization outside the home will operate successfully. It is about building the dog's confidence in his human leader/teacher.

Studies in human desensitization programs have shown that confidence and trust in the therapist is a key and essential ingredient, when a fearful individual is learning successful coping skills in facing fears.

In my experience, fear aggressive dogs relax when they come to view their owner as making all decisions, and view themselves as having no decision-making authority in any social situation where the owner is present, and where there is a threat of any kind.

It is true that many fear aggressive dogs are just fine at home, and live their lives there in comfort and ease. They never experience the challenge of being faced with a stressor, and then handling it with the guidance of the human, because everything goes smoothly at home.

Then, when out on the street, they go to pieces, as we have seen over and over again here on this list. An example of providing a dog with a challenge at home, and then guiding him through the process of facing it, comes from the exercise that we do not shower the fearful dog with attention just for existing. We require him to work for our attention, and teach him the crucial pattern: he must follow human direction before he gets approval, or privileges. This is the way he is linked to his human; on his own, he has no authority, at home or out in public.

A dog with severe behavioral difficulties in my home has much less freedom and privileges than an already confident dog, even when the behavioural difficulties are occurring in an outside context. For example, he may not be free to wander and choose his own resting spot, but may be required to remain in a long down when the family is watching TV in the evening. He may not be taken for a walk every time another dog is walked, but he may be asked to wait quietly

behind. He may get little off leash time in the yard during re-training, but be helped to learn that he is always under the watchful, confident protection of his human leader.

He is never allowed to enter all rooms of the house at will, or share the furniture, or allowed access to doors or gates without first following a specific instruction that communicates that the human decides what is happening next. All this is done kindly, enthusiastically and with great significant rewards for compliance. The human is learning how to expect something of the dog, and to be confident that the dog can give a great deal (self control, deference, obedience) to the training relationship.

Unless you really work to create these opportunities to express confident leadership, they may not happen in many homes, just because of the way the dog fits seamlessly into daily life.

This actually hampers confidence for a dog with a wonky temperament, in my experience. He doesn't really understand his place, and that comes out loud and clear when he sees something on the street that he doesn't like, and attempts to attack it.

As Barbara and Hope have outlined, desensitization efforts are powerful when properly conducted. But the leadership program gives a key ingredient that make these efforts go more smoothly.

Just my opinion and experience,

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