



Dogs With Attitude ...Or Are They?

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“Growl Class,” “Difficult Dog,” and “Feisty Fido” are all names for behavior modification classes that address behavior problems related to dogs reacting to dogs, sometimes to people, and sometimes to everything. The dogs are normally labeled “reactive” dogs. Group behavior modification classes have grown in popularity over the last ten-year period as the canine population in the Bay Area has become more congested, making it necessary for dogs to be tolerant in densely-populated dog parks and on crowded city streets.

A curious aspect of these group therapy classes is that they address what is, for all practical purposes, normal behavior for dogs: aggressive barking, snarls and that sort of thing. The dogs that qualify for these classes have a lot of things in common. Most are quite friendly with people and function well within their families. Most are more tolerant off leash than on. All have incredibly caring and committed people who are worried about them and scared enough to have developed fear responses every time they see whatever it is that sets their dogs off. The dogs fall roughly into two groups: the confident dogs who shop for opportunities to sound off at other dogs, and the shy, fearful ones who take a defensive stance when faced with perceived threat, but want to run away. From time to time, dogs that bark at, lunge at, or are afraid of people come into classes to benefit from the systematic desensitization that the classes offer.

Reactive dogs are usually highly-sensitive, high-energy dogs who are aware of everything in their environment. Many had frightening experiences during the critical first weeks of life or they had no socialization at all. Leashes, car windows, fences and other kinds of barriers have frustrated them, rendering them unable to approach or get away from the dogs, people, and things that, from their viewpoint, threaten them on a daily basis. They sometimes look as though they are going to meet a dog or person safely, but then blow up into a growling fit in the middle of the meeting. They are frustrating, and often scary, dogs to live with.

While their actions certainly meet the definition of bad behavior, as we watch them, they tell us something about themselves. We may not always know for sure why they are reacting, but by watching what they do and when they do it, an experienced trainer can create behavior modification routines to reduce the dogs' arousal state. Finding a neutral emotional state to reinforce is the first step in changing the dogs' outward behavior.

The dogs' handlers do a lot of the right things intuitively, but either do them too late, too close to other dogs, or their timing is off. So, even though the approach may be right, it's just off enough to be ineffective. For instance, when dogs are hyped up in the middle of an aggressive display, communicating ideas to them is just not possible. They can't be reasoned with or soothed. Punishment and corrections are likely to cause even more agitation, and trying to

insert alternative behavior, such as sit or down, can create more frustration while dogs are in such a state.

Among the benefits of doing a group class to effect behavior change is that the humans get coached in taking a relaxed but alert attitude so they are not taken by surprise. They start learning to change their own behavior, which has often become anxious when they are out with their dogs, and which has a profound effect on the dogs' behavior. They learn how to time rewards so the dogs are continuously rewarded for relaxed and tolerant behavior, during which time the dogs are in a neutral, relaxed frame of mind. Everyone learns to avoid encounters and to apply systematic desensitization, a process of working at the distance at which the dogs are relaxed and non-reactive. Following through, they then reinforce and maintain that state as the dogs move closer to the subjects they might react to. A good class emphasizes safety and teaches the dogs' handlers safety maneuvers so they can keep their dogs out of trouble. Dogs look forward to their classes. During class sessions they get lots of food, praise and massage.

Our class here at Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society is called "Dogs With Attitude." The organization has offered these unique classes for several years. Each dog-and-handler team gets a private evaluation session and seven class sessions with the other dogs. While most dogs who lack early socialization may never be able to romp and play with others of their own kind, they invariably show improvement and become safer and easier for their people to live and go out with. A few other organizations in the Bay Area offer them as well, some with secondary levels of remedial socialization. If you think your dog is a DWA (Dog With Attitude) check out our schedule in the Dog Training section at www.berkeleyhumane.org.