

BEHAVIOUR IN FOCUS

PART 1: Preventing Dog Behaviour Problems

By Kerry Vinson, B.A.



In a previous *PETS Magazine* article (March/April 2007), an authoritative source estimated that half of all dogs born in the United States would be euthanized due to behaviour problems before reaching the age of two. The sad reality behind this appalling statistic is that, in my opinion, almost all of them can be saved from this fate if the appropriate actions are taken early in a dog's life.

It all starts by socializing a dog at an early age to everything that it will encounter later on in life, e.g. other dogs, children, strangers, loud noises, etc. There are varying opinions as to when the ideal window for this socialization process is; the most common time frame I've come across is between the ages of eight and 20 weeks. Current research suggests the time frame begins even earlier, when a dog is still with its littermates. Regardless, in my view you can't start this process too soon, and I feel it should be open-ended and ongoing as a dog matures.

After early socialization, the next important step should be obedience training. This can be done in a class setting or individually by a dog's owner(s). The advantage of a class setting is that this can also contribute to the socialization process with other dogs. The most important aspect of any dog training approach is that it should be geared towards using positive reinforcement to teach appropriate behaviour, as opposed to the widely accepted philosophy promoted in the latter part of the last century, namely using corrections and/or physical punishment. Despite the fact that there are differing opinions

among dog trainers and no real universally agreed-upon standards, there is ample research on canine learning that indicates using a positive reinforcement approach is more effective in the long term than a punishment or aversive-conditioning approach.

In general, canine behaviour is rooted in a combination of genetics and learning in varying degrees. For behaviours primarily due to learning, owners have the opportunity to determine how their dog behaves in any given situation. In order to do this, a commitment of time and effort is required on the part of owners, because dogs (especially puppies and young adults) are continually learning during their waking hours – and unless you're teaching them acceptable behavior, they may learn behaviour that is not appropriate. An common example of this that I have encountered countless times is a dog that growls when someone comes to the door, and that will not stop growling when asked to do so. Initially, this is ignored by the owner, as many people want their dog to alert them to this type of situation, but over time the growling can evolve into much more aggressive behaviour (such as snapping and lunging if the person at the door is invited into the house). At this point, the dog's owners often decide to shut the dog in another room to avoid further problems. However, this isn't really addressing the unwanted behaviour and teaching the dog to accept visitors into its territory.

My opinion in this scenario is that it's okay to have a watch dog/ guard dog, but such a dog must obey your directions to cease its guarding behaviour and adopt a calm, non-aggressive posture. As some dogs are genetically predisposed to display protective behaviour, they need to be subject to behaviour modification that overrides this tendency in order to prevent an incident from occurring. On a personal note, one of my own dogs is a Caucasian Ovcharka, a rare breed in Canada which is (genetically speaking) one of, if not *the*, most aggressive

guarding breeds in existence. However, with consistent exercises I have taught Sugar Bear (pictured with me, left) to stop guarding behaviour upon a simple command. As she weighs 125 pounds, this has had to be accomplished without the use of physical force or punishment, and primarily by using positive reinforcement. Essentially, this means teaching your dog that when he/she follows your directions something good will always happen. I like to see my own dogs follow my directions because they want to, not because they are afraid of what will happen to them if they don't. This approach also strengthens the human/animal bond, and if can work with an Ovcharka, it can work with any dog.

In summation, I would assert that by putting the time and energy required into socialization and early behaviour training using positive reinforcement methodology, virtually any dog can be taught the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. This will dramatically reduce the chances your dog becoming another statistic, by ensuring that it lives a long and happy life...with you. If you have earnestly tried to modify an inappropriate display of aggression from your dog and have not been successful, then you should contact your veterinarian for advice before making any drastic decisions. In conjunction with your vet, you can discuss the possibility of behavioural medications or other alternatives that may be helpful as an adjunct to an overall behaviour program. 🐾

Kerry Vinson, founder of Animal Behaviour Consultants, has a BA in Psychology and has extensively studied animal learning and behaviour modification. In addition to conducting seminars on canine behaviour and assessing dogs with behavioural problems, he has been designated by the Province of Ontario as an Expert Witness in the area of canine aggression, and has testified in provincial inquests and other high-profile court cases. For more information, contact him at (800) 754-3920 or (905) 352-3353.

Photo courtesy Kerry Vinson