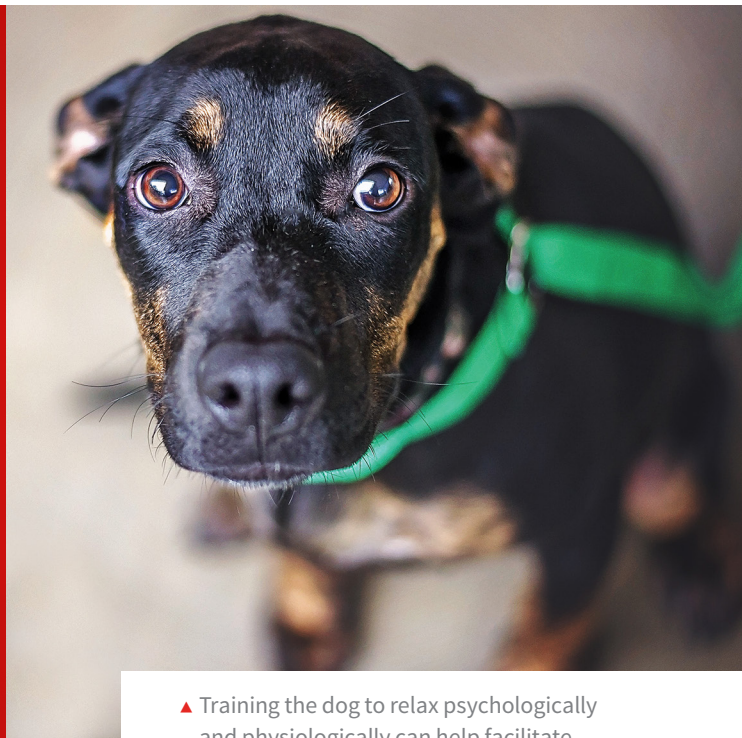


Fear Aggression

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▲ Training the dog to relax psychologically and physiologically can help facilitate calm behavior in the presence of a fear-evoking stimulus.

During a routine veterinary visit, Bella, an 8-month-old spayed Labrador retriever mixed-breed dog, growled and lunged at people in the lobby and examination room.

History

The dog was adopted at 12 weeks of age from the local animal shelter. The owner reported that Bella was always a little shy with humans and took some time to warm up to visitors within the house. On walks, she backed away from people or rolled onto her back when approached. Beginning at approximately 6 months of age, Bella began growling at some approaching individuals on walks and barking at visitors to the house. Within the past month, this escalated to piloerection, barking and lunging at people who approached within 6 feet on walks, and growling and

snapping at visitors who attempted to reach out and touch her.

Physical Examination & Behavior

In the examination room, Bella sat with her head low and tail tucked beside her owner. She panted slightly with the lip commissures pulled tightly back, and mild piloerection was present. Her eyes were wide, and she shook slightly. As the veterinary nurse approached, Bella began to back under the owner's chair and growled loudly.

The owner pulled the dog from under the chair and was able to muzzle her without issue. As the nurse began to restrain the dog, Bella tried to scramble away. When she could not, she urinated on the floor and then froze and remained stiff throughout the physical examination. No abnormal findings were noted on physical examination.

ASK YOURSELF

What immediate recommendations should you give to the owner?

- A. Enroll the puppy in day care and an obedience class for socialization.
- B. No specific action is needed, as the puppy will grow out of this as she matures.
- C. Temporarily remove the puppy from public exposure and begin teaching her foundation skills that can help facilitate reintroduction to people.
- D. Send the animal to a puppy boot camp program for obedience so she can learn her proper place in the family pack.
- E. Start medication to reduce the puppy's fear and take the puppy on more public outings to increase her socialization with other people.

BEST ANSWER

C—Temporarily remove the puppy from public exposure and begin teaching her foundation skills.

Owners of fearful and fear aggressive dogs often make the mistake of thinking that mere exposure to people will improve the problem. Although this does occasionally happen, in many cases the dog actually becomes more sensitized and reactive to the presence of people. Just taking a dog to day care or walking it around the neighborhood and letting people try to force “friendship” on the dog is dangerous for the dog and the people. Sending the dog to a boot camp also often makes the dog worse. The dog is surrounded by strangers and stressed dogs, and these facilities may use harsh training methods, which are contraindicated for fearful animals. Fear aggression is not a hierar-

chy problem, and the fearfulness is not related to the dog's status with the owner.

At this point, a structured behavior-modification program focusing on counterconditioning is needed for this puppy. The behavior-modification program gives the dog a set of alternative skills by which she can cope with fear-evoking situations.

The clinician first should identify 3 specific pieces of information:

- Proximal antecedents (eg, people within 6 feet of the dog and/or reaching toward her)
- Problem behavior (eg, growling and lunging at people)
- Consequence that reinforces the behavior (eg, person withdraws, owner pets dog)

Once these pieces are clarified, a methodical behavior-modification program can be devised and implemented, starting with teaching some basic foundation skills. Basic foundation skills often include simple obedience behaviors (eg, sit, down, come, walk on a loose leash), nose targeting, and eye contact with owner (a “look” or “watch me” cue). Relaxation techniques are also of paramount importance for helping to modulate the dog's emotional responses.¹

When appropriate, anxiolytic medication (eg, serotonin reuptake inhibitors) can facilitate response to the behavior-modification program. Medication can be used to control baseline fear, anxiety, and/or stressor situations (eg, visitors to home, trips to the veterinary clinic). The age of a puppy is not a con-

Foundation Skills: Basic cues from owner to dog, such as sit, down, hand targeting, and orienting to the owner.

Boot camp: A board-and-train program, typically lasting 1–4 weeks, in which dogs undergo intensive training to try to fix a problem in a (typically unrealistically) short period.

traindication for using medication to control fear. The earlier the problem is controlled, the less abnormal neural wiring occurs as the puppy matures.

Once the dog has learned foundation skills at home and in familiar environments, it can be gradually exposed to visitors at home and people in public. Ideally, exposures are done such that the dog does not show significant fearfulness or overt aggression. These exposures are highly choreographed to maintain public safety and to ensure the animal remains in the desired emotional state.

The Take-Home

- ▶ Success and safety require structured behavior modification—not just mere exposure.
- ▶ Set the dog (and owner) up for success—the dog should not be exposed to situations that its training has not prepared it to handle.
- ▶ Use anxiolytic medication in puppies when the signs warrant it. ■■■

Reference

1. Overall K. Noise phobias in dogs. In: *BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine*. Gloucester, UK: BSAVA; 2002:170.

WHAT IS AGGRESSION?

- ▶ Aggression is not a trait within the animal but rather a response the animal has to something in the environment.
- ▶ Aggression generally includes behaviors such as growling, snapping, snarling, and biting. Certain forms of barking and lunging may also be categorized as aggressive.
- ▶ Although the term *fear aggression* helps individuals understand the underlying emotional state of the animal, the designation is otherwise too broad to be helpful in devising a solution to the problem.



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