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“My dog was abused and now he’s aggressive.”

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August 27th, 2007

Here’s a fictionalized compilation of stories I’ve heard from people about their aggressive dogs. Most people who work with aggressive dogs will recognize this story from their work.

Josie Q. Owner will say, “We adopted our dog from the shelter. He was fine for a few weeks but after he’d been here a while he started barking and growling at any man that came over to visit. When our friend lifted his hand one day our dog lunged at him then hid behind me. We are sure he was abused by a man before we got him.”

People commonly assume that if their dog behaves either fearfully or aggressively that he or she was the victim of abuse. To my surprise, while surfing the web about this subject, I noticed that even some experts have presented the “he was abused” assessment as part of their response to owners asking about aggression in their dogs. While certainly being abused may be the start down the slippery slope toward aggressive behavior, assuming that abuse actually occurred is often stretching it. If we didn’t see the abuse happening, it’s best not to assume it occurred. That assumption may lead us off on a path that doesn’t help us make progress in dealing with the aggression. The good news is that we don’t need to know how behavior got started to change behavior.

Aggression is situation-specific, and aggression toward a specific kind of person or in a specific situation does not necessarily mean that the dog was abused at any point in his life. I’ve worked with quite a few dogs that were adopted into good homes as puppies, who were never hit or mistreated, and who still show up with aggressive behaviors at some point down the road. Dogs, like all animals and humans, behave in ways that pay off for them. Unfortunately, aggression sometimes pays off quite neatly for them.

The 2 important questions to ask when trying to understand a given dog’s aggression is, “In what situations does this behavior happen?” and “What happens after the dog behaves aggressively?” It is also helpful to understand situations in which the dog is not aggressive so that you can appreciate that your dog can behave in desirable ways.

In most cases of problem aggression the dog has learned that his aggressive behavior makes people or animals go away. The most common answer to, “What happens after he behaves aggressively?” is, “People or animals back off.” The behavior puts distance between him and something or someone else. The more experience the dog has in getting people or animals he doesn’t want around to back off by being aggressive, the more aggressively he will behave.

What if his aggression involves chasing prey (which may include small dogs or cats, squirrels, even children)? It depends. I once had a dog who eagerly chased squirrels throughout her life, and never once caught one. It appears that she was just as happy getting them to go away as she might have been catching one. Since she never caught one we might be right to assume that her behavior was



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reinforced by getting the squirrel to run away. For other dogs who actually catch some of the prey they chase, we might be looking at something a little different. These dogs don't get rid of the thing they behave aggressively toward- they kill and possibly eat it.

From time to time we come across a dog that has been taught to play roughly and in order to initiate play they begin to act roughly. This can accelerate to the point that they begin to growl, bark, and even bite at people they want to play with.

The other question, "In what situations does this behavior happen?" includes all the stuff in the environment at the time the aggression occurs. Often it will be something like, "A stranger approached him" or "another dog came into view." Sometimes it will be quite specific, like, "She's only aggressive toward my sister, and only when my husband is gone." (Seriously!) Other times the dog may be aggressive only in one place, but not in others (e.g. He's aggressive toward dogs in the park, but fine with dogs in our back yard), or only toward a type of person (men or children, for example). There can even be very subtle situations like the time of day or how cold it is.

The aggressive behaviors described here indicate that the dog has been successful in chasing men away by behaving aggressively. We may not know why the dog wants to chase the guy away, but we can change the behavior by teaching the man to go away only when the dog is behaving nicely and stay put when he is behaving aggressively. Clearly this may involve some training. Over time he will most likely stop wanting the guy to go away because he'll learn that he is not a threat.

The good news is that we don't have to know why a behavior got started in order to treat it. This is especially good news because with dogs adopted in adulthood from shelters we rarely know anything about his life before the shelter.

Constructional Aggression Treatment: Shaping Away Canine Aggression