

Socialization, Agility, and Leadership: Teaching Working Dogs to Overcome Environmental Challenges

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Working dogs like police K-9s and search and rescue dogs are exposed to different terrains, structures, noises, surfaces and distractions which affect their ability to learn and work. Dog handlers, trainers and people who raise and educate working dog prospects need to pay attention to the dog's exposure to environmental challenges as an integral part of dog training.

Working dogs are bred to be tough and resilient, but they cannot be bred to be unreactive to stimuli. Dogs that are dull or very unreactive are hard to motivate because they will not react to the play, prey and aggression stimuli needed to train them. Good breeding is a balance of tolerance and reactivity.

Even a well-bred dog can be ruined by bad experiences, just as the bravest and toughest of police officers succumb to critical incident stress. Young dogs and puppies are particularly sensitive to environmental stress, yet they have to learn about the world and what will harm them and what will not. Their socialization and experiences while young are crucial to their success as a working dog. Young dogs are genetically programmed to explore their environments and have a short attention span, traits which make them harder to train but insure that they learn about their surroundings.

Critical Learning Periods

Scientific studies have shown that there are critical learning periods in a dog's lifetime. Seven to twelve weeks is a critical socialization period where dogs should be exposed to people, other dogs, animals and new environments and activities. Things the pup experiences during this time will be automatically accepted later on. The juvenile months between four months and a year are important for social development. The more positive and varied the young dog's experiences are, the more rounded and confident they will be as an adult. Dog which are deprived from contact and socialization while young almost always turn out to be untrainable as working dogs.

Consequently, problems with surfaces, loud noises, etc. are best prevented by proper exposure when the dog is young. Breeders raising dogs need to ensure the dogs are socialized and exposed. Handlers raising young dogs need to get the dogs out into the world

and see that they have positive experiences in all the areas they will be working in when an adult.

A common problem with imported dogs is the inability to work on slippery floors. This occurs in the European countries because working dogs don't come indoors but spend most of their time in outside kennels. Many of these dogs come to the US without ever learning how to climb stairs. Departments that don't want to spend time conditioning the dog to slippery floors should test for this when they buy dogs. Because most departments don't raise their own dogs, they have to rely on testing to see if prospective dogs can adapt to new situations.

Many dogs have poor or marginal working temperaments and cannot adapt to new environments. Since police dogs almost never work at home, all testing of prospective candidates should occur in areas new to the dog. The dog that happily chases a ball at home may not function in a new place. The dog that eagerly chases balls in new places just as intensely as he does at home is usually a great working candidate.

Socialization with Other Dogs

I think that most handlers and trainers have progressed beyond the old style of thinking that working dogs should only be exposed to their handler and kept away from all other people. We all know that puppies and young dogs that are raised with people and children learn how to relate to humans and don't have problems when they are adults. Unfortunately, handlers still tend to keep their dogs away from other dogs, thinking that this will cause their dogs to not become distracted by other dogs when older. Often the opposite is true. The dog which is not socialized with other dogs will become fascinated by or fear other dogs. In a working dog, fear means the dog will either flee or fight. Since the unsocialized dog doesn't know how to relate and becomes fearful, lack of socialization contributes greatly to the dog becoming aggressive around other dogs. Owners and handlers which keep dogs on a tight lead, pull the dog away from other dogs, become anxious around other dogs, correct the dog for looking at other dogs, etc., only help to convince the dog that aggression or fear is the proper response.

The best way to prevent dog aggression is proper socialization with dogs when the dog is a puppy and juvenile. Puppy kindergarten classes or socialization classes are great for this if you are a single dog owner. Dogs raised by breeders in a large kennel rarely have problems relating to other dogs until their new owners start to encourage aggression through poor management and handling.

Proper socialization means exposure to other well-socialized dogs that can play with, communicate with and enforce canine "social discipline" without hurting the pup. Like children, the puppy needs to learn behavioral limits. Puppies learn that biting hard is not acceptable in play and to respect other dogs and their possessions. These basic lessons also go a long way in relations with people and can save dog owners a great deal of grief in having to teach the puppy or dog basic behavioral rules themselves.

Puppies of all breeds usually get along. The best way to socialize puppies is to let them all go loose in a group. If well-mannered adults are available, they are valuable members in the group. Well-supervised "doggie day care" groups are one way a mix of dogs can socialize. One reason most search and rescue dogs get along is that most SAR dog groups understand how important socialization is and have periods of group interaction for their dogs.

Of course, play with other dogs should not replace time and training with the dog's owner. Most dog "fixation" or dependency problems are caused by owners who don't spend quality time with their dogs but rely on other dogs to raise or entertain their dog, creating a dog which is socially dependent on other dogs.

Breeds and individual dogs have different characteristics that can cause aggression problems. For example, most of the herding breeds like the German Shepherds have a "personal space" they don't want strangers and strange dogs in. They will usually stiffen up and communicate their displeasure when a strange dog approaches too close. If the new dog is well socialized, it will respect this space and approach carefully to let the herding dog understand that it means no harm.

In contrast, Labs and Goldens seem to have "negative" personal space, running up to people and dogs and jumping all over them, saying, "touch me, touch me." This often gets them in trouble with other dogs, leaving the retriever's owner saying, "he just wanted to make friends" and the German Shepherd owner wondering why the retriever owner doesn't control his dog better.

In a well-socialized group of dogs, the behavior they display is fascinating. I belong to a search and rescue group that has a mix of breeds, including many touchy female German Shepherds who don't want other dogs running up to them quickly. As aggressive as they seem to be, the group has a female Lab who is never bitten but always manages to run up to all the dogs in the group and greet them. This Lab will run up at top speed and then throw herself prostrate on the ground in front of an aggressive dog. The other dog will growl over the Lab, then seem to forgive, at which point the Lab darts off and

rockets around, trying to get the other dog to chase. If that doesn't work, the Lab runs off to greet another victim.

Dogs have their own language that communicates everything they need to relate to other dogs. If we don't let them learn that language when young, they become crippled in their ability to relate to other dogs. Dogs also use this language when they try to communicate with humans, but most humans don't understand the subtle signals they use. Often dogs that are confronting an agitator for the first time will display signals that try to get the agitator to stop his aggressive actions. Although we may call actions like sniffing, looking away and yawning "avoidance," they are really canine communication signals. A good reference on these signals is "On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals" by Turgid Rugaas, a short and inexpensive book every K-9 handler should read.

Dog owners also have to understand that growling, showing teeth, stiffening the body, direct stares, etc., are signals the dogs use to communicate. They are not unwanted behavior because they help to prevent physical violence and biting. Just as we as police officers use commands, warning announcements and displays to prevent our having to use physical force, growling, barking and posturing are valuable communication for dogs communicating with other dogs and for dogs with humans. Handlers and owners who become obsessed with eliminating these displays because they think they are preventing dog aggression are only eliminating the dogs' communication ability. Dogs that have been taught not to growl often end up remaining silent until they are in biting range when they suddenly attack. The dog is then blamed for "attacking without warning or provocation" when a simple growl from the dog would have warned all involved that the dog was feeling stressed.

Preventing and Managing Dog Aggression

Dog aggression is much easier to prevent than cure. In fact, there probably is no total cure for dog aggression once it becomes firmly established, and working dogs, because of their breeding, have a greater potential for aggression than other breeds.

Dog aggression is prevented by proper socialization with other dogs and not letting the dog be exposed to other aggressive dogs. This is very difficult in our society because of the number of unsocialized, aggressive dogs that are created by the way we raise and keep them. Dogs confined behind a fence, dogs tied on a line and dogs kept on lead are unable to flee what they fear, so they learn that aggression will drive the other dog away so they can feel better. The rehearsal of aggression also causes the dog to release hormones that

cause them to feel better. The cycle of fear, aggression, and relief from fear teaches the dog that aggression is the way to go and a powerful adaptive reflex. When a dog fears for its safety, distracting it or trying to teach it other responses is difficult to do.

Since most police K-9 prospects are bought as young adults, handlers don't know what their history is. Most, when they first arrive, are younger and unsure in the new environment. Because of this insecurity they rarely show aggression towards other dogs when out in the open, but may become fearful when confined or confronted.

Handlers with new dogs should be proactive and be aware of situations that might encourage dog aggression. They should not leave their dogs in a crate, kennel or vehicle right where other dogs will be walking by closely and antagonizing the dog. They should not tie their dogs out or walk on a leash close by other dogs, or if they do, they should be aware of the dogs' body language and what signals a potential problem. They should avoid exposing their dog to aggressive dogs and seek out contact with friendly dogs.

Each dog will have a distance that they are comfortable with when a potential threat is approaching. When the threat comes too close and the dog isn't given any guidance by his handler, the dog will react on his own. Handlers need to know what their dog's distance is, and move away, distract or take over the leadership of the situation as is appropriate. Handlers need to avoid having the dog give an aggressive display if they want to prevent the learning of dog aggression.

General Rules for Exposure to New Challenges

Learning to deal with aggressive dogs is only one of many challenges young dogs need to overcome. Each time a dog is exposed to something new, the dog forms life-long associations with that new situation. Handlers and owners need to control experiences so the dog has positive associations with situations they will encounter while working. Handlers can do this in three ways:

- 1) Avoiding situations they think will overwhelm the dog and cause a fear response. Start training gradually with things like gunfire, agitation, and agility. If the dog starts to show fear or avoidance, back off without acknowledging or encouraging the fear. If needed, this can be done by distracting the dog with play, food or making a joke of the situation. One handler I know pretends to be happy and crazy when she makes a mistake cutting her dog's toenails. This keeps the dog from fearing the situation as long as it is

not done too often. If something bad happens, try not to “run away” from it as if you, the handler are fearful, unless, of course, the situation warrants it.

- 2) Add positive elements to the situation. Feed the dog during gunfire and treat and play with the dog while other dogs are around. Associate the presence of other dogs, gunfire and agility equipment with toys, food, and/or play. This is one reason why positive motivation can be so helpful in training. The dog learns to associate all training with positive reinforcement.
- 3) Don't add any negatives. Correcting the dog for fear will only cause more stress and fear. Correcting the dog for looking at other dogs will cause the dog to fear other dogs and only cause the dog to avoid them or become aggressive to try to drive them away. Never use corrections to try to prevent or cure behaviors caused by fear. The problem will only become worse with time. Be aware that excessive or unfair corrections will cause fear and stress. Corrections can cause the dog to fear things that the handler does not intend, and corrections can create dog on dog and dog on handler aggression.
- 4) Be a leader. Show the dog what to do by your example, body language, and actions. Often you can get by a distraction or problem by ignoring it and convincing the dog that you don't think it is anything worth your time or attention. If a handler looks at a distraction, the dog will look also. If the handler looks elsewhere, the dog will look elsewhere. Be a leader by using your obedience commands and training to control the dog and take the lead. For example, if you have to approach another dog team and your dog is not under command, put the dog under a command like heel, or a down stay and approach the team yourself, leaving the dog behind. If approaching another friendly person you think your dog might be aggressive towards, greet the person in a friendly manner before the dog gets to the critical distance to show the dog you think the person is friendly. Be aware of problem situations, be proactive and take the lead before the dog does. Leading often means moving ahead of the dog or between the dog and whatever the approaching problem is. Often just communicating you are in control by approaching the threat as a team rather than having the problem

approach the dog team can be effective in showing the dog the handler is in control.

Using your body language to distract and control a dog can be extremely helpful, especially if the dog is young and untrained. Using body language is also a non-compulsive way to manipulate older dogs. For example, you are out walking your young dog off leash and spot a wild prey toy (like a cat) trying to hide in the bushes. You know that if your dog sees the cat, he will chase it and run who knows where. The dog will also have great fun chasing the cat and learn to seek them out later on when you'd rather the dog be tracking or finding evidence. Behaviors that you allow your dog to "rehearse" or do are behaviors your dog will learn.

First of all, once you spot the cat, don't stare at it or continue looking at it. A direct stare immediately alerts the dog that something has your attention, and if the dog is bonded to you, he will immediately want to know what has your attention and go looking for it. You can use this to your advantage when you want the dog to look at the suspect you are going to challenge, but you don't want the dog to spot a potential distraction if you can help it.

Turn around and walk away from the cat, trying to get the dog to come with you. If that doesn't work immediately, you can bend down and pretend to be intensely interested in something on the ground in front of you. Often this will bring the dog over without a command because he wants to see what you are interested in. You can also pretend to start playing with a toy or pull a treat out, but don't do this too often without delivering the toy or the dog will learn to ignore you.

Using your attention also serves well in competition. Focus all your attention on your dog and he will focus on you. Break your attention on your dog to look at someone or something, and your dog will look also. Learn to be aware of what is around without looking directly at it, and look away from those things you don't want your dog to be aware of.

The personality of a dog owner will shape the personality of his dog because the young dog looks to the owner's behavior for guidance when experiencing the world. A confident and secure handler will usually produce a confident and secure dog. An aggressive handler will produce an aggressive dog. This is one reason why the choice of who becomes a K-9 handler is so crucial to the team's success.

Reconditioning Problem Behaviors

Dogs that have developed problem behaviors due to bad experiences can be re-conditioned with positive motivators if the problem is not too deeply engrained or the result of bad temperament. The theory is simple – associate the situation with positive things – food treats, play, positive relationships with the handler, etc. rather than the negatives which caused the fear to begin with.

Sometimes fear or stress can be caused by the handler's putting too much psychological pressure on the dog to perform. Some dogs are genetically wired to try to please their handlers to a high degree. I've seen some dogs learn to rush up the USPCA catwalk simply because their handlers kept asking them to do it at a pace that was too fast for the dog to cope with. The catwalk should be climbed in a careful, controlled manner that serves the dog when climbing steep stairs or ladders that are over 6 feet tall, not a jump and rush that gets to the top of the catwalk but would result in a fall if there was not platform to stop on. A dog has to learn to climb the catwalk ladder when he feels he is confident and has the physical skill to do so, not when the handler thinks he is ready. It should be trained by showing the dog the catwalk, placing a motivator on the first few steps and rewarding for the first few steps or attempts rather than only rewarding at the top. I had one young dog that I started working in agility at eight months. I kept placing food treats on the ladder, over and over again, presenting the problem, but he did not climb for several months. After three months of having the dog make attempts but not climb all the way, and working on stairs and ladders that were easier, one day the dog climbed calmly all the way to the top and never refused or failed to climb after that. Trying to force this dog to climb would have created fear and stress that would affect his ability to do agility the rest of his life.

Stress and fear also have negative effects on agility and physical performance because they cause the dog to tighten his muscles. He won't move as freely and will make more mistakes and suffer more injuries. The more relaxed and confident a dog is in agility, the better.

Be aware of how motivators affect the dog's mood and performance. If a dog has problems with slippery floors, throwing a ball for the dog to chase across the floor is not the correct approach. As the dog tries to chase, he will dig his toenails in and slip all the more. Using a calm motivator like food treats or the dog's meals is much more appropriate. Work on less slippery floors and progress to polished floors. Work to get one foot off the rug, then two, then three, then four. If the dog has a real phobia for something, break the conditioning into the smallest possible steps.

Don't use motivators that make the dog move fast if the training requires a certain physical technique that should be trained slowly.

Many dogs jump too flat over a jump because they try to jump too fast. Using toys as motivators to get the dog to the other side of the jump can cause this. Using a "calmer" reward like food or praise with a toy delivered to the dog well after the jump can help the dog focus on technique instead of speed.

Dogs with dog aggression problems should be exposed to other dogs in controlled circumstances and rewarded positively for not looking at the other dogs. This progresses until the dog will tolerate other dogs nearby without showing aggression. In these situations dogs trained in obedience using positive motivation learn to put their energy into following the handler's commands rather than worrying about other dogs. Having a job to do when the job has a positive reward associated with correct performance gives the dog something to focus on. This same approach should be used in tracking, searching and scent work. If the dog has problems with some distraction, set up training with the distraction such that the dog will notice it but still be able to work through the problem and get a reward. Through success and reward the dog will learn to focus on the task at hand, not the distraction.

If the distraction the dog focuses on is not really harmful, sometimes releasing the dog to engage the distraction can be a motivator for work. For example, for some reason, genetic or learned, a dog may become preoccupied with sniffing and scent marking. This is not really harmful for the dog, but it can be a nuisance when trying to train the dog to work. To use scent marking as a reward, make up a command that tells the dog it is free to mark and use the command when letting the dog relieve itself so that it associates the command with scent marking. Assuming the dog knows some obedience commands, give the dog some commands he knows, and release the dog to mark as a reward for completing the commands. Slowly extend the amount of time the dog works for the release, and control the other times the dog can mark by discouraging marking (without strong corrections) when permission is not given. Eventually you should be able to convince the dog that compliance with commands will earn the dog the privilege of a break to mark. This progression is harder to accomplish in tracking, but can be done if the dog is exposed to many short, motivational tracks with the handler discouraging marking and encouraging tracking, then opportunity to mark given after the reward is given for finding the tracklayer.

In Summary

The best way to prevent problem behaviors in working environments is to expose the dog at a young age in a positive

manner to the things he will encounter when working. If problems do develop in dogs of good temperament, they can often be fixed using positive motivators. Avoid using corrections or other physical force if the dog is stressed and fearful.