



Fear Based Aggression

There is a current movement among trainers and behaviorists classifying almost all aggressive behaviors into the “fear-based” category. The issue with this is that, “*We can’t give a dog a correction if they’re fearful.*” This light-footed attitude leaves dogs unguided and usually gets them killed in municipal shelters.

I agree that fear based dogs should not be approached in the same manner as dominance based aggressive dogs. However, these dogs still require structure and we should give them that structure in a form that they can grasp. Also, when we face a dominantly aggressive dog we must not shy away from calling him *aggressive* and dealing with this aggression as it needs to be dealt with. Since this article is about fear-based aggression, I’d like to keep the focus on just that.

Recently I was teaching at a humane society and met a fear-based aggressive dog named Xena. Xena is a large Doberman that had classical fear based aggression and wasn’t afraid to lash out. It took me almost 10 minutes to get her out of her kennel (without getting bit). I worked with her and instructed staff and volunteers on proper procedure for handling her. My instructions were explicit and I’ll explain them below.

Recently I heard from the people who eventually adopted Xena and their words were music to my ears. The couple is totally in love with Xena and Xena is in love with them. Xena now participates in obedience classes and lives a very normal life. All of this after she was scheduled to be killed the day I arrived at the humane society. My techniques for dealing with aggression are unique in that I address each dog differently and don’t follow a textbook or clinical approach to a real world problem. Using a blanket approach, no matter how scientific, can be a death sentence to a dog. The classic problem with this “scientific” approach is that it does not take into account the benefit even a fear-based dog can derive from a proper correction. Never giving a dog correction is like driving from Chicago to LA making only left-hand turns.

Before I talk about the way to handle this fear-based aggression, I want to share a mail that I received from a vet student and point out an important line, which I will highlight for you. It’s one of those things that rub me the wrong way about many trainers who have no place in

handling aggression. The person who wrote the letter read an article that was written about Xena's story and my training.... Please read:

Thank you so much for this article. It came at a very opportune time for me. I am currently a Vet Tech student. We, like many programs, have our own population of kennel dogs and cats that are used for a year to assist us in learning critical techniques. We also employ an Animal Advocate program in which each student is part of a team responsible for a group of our animals. We ensure that they receive extra playtime, socialization and one on one attention every day. It's not an ideal life, but after a year, they are adopted out.

*One of my team's Animal Advocate dogs is a small Pit Bull mix named Betty. Betty has been at the kennels since last year. Over the summer she developed pyometra. She was treated for the condition, but some time after that, some of the staff indicated that she was exhibiting signs of aggression. **Our behavior trainer, who is all about counter conditioning, positive reinforcement, etc advocated that she be euthanized for her behavior. They did not work with her,** they say they tried to get a shelter to take her (if you were asked to take in a dog aggressive, stranger aggressive animal into your shelter, what would your response be, besides a big fat no?)*

First off, please understand that using a single sided approach, be it reward-based or correction-based, is no way to approach any training.

When I found Xena in her kennel, she was shut down and crouched in the back. She was shaking and not trusting anyone. She would not move, but if you approached her, she would bare her teeth and growl in a tone that even a novice would understand means business. My theory is that we don't back down to dogs that exhibit this behavior. If you give in to the dog's dominance here, they'll either own you or feel that you were going to do something wrong and that their growl was properly received and justified. Instead, I wait calmly and stay put. Some dogs will lunge, some will only growl and snap. In either case, still and calm stays the course.

In doing this, we do two things:

1. We desensitize the dog to our presence.
2. We teach the dog that we're not going anywhere and mean no harm.

I stayed the course until eventually I was able to place a leash (slip lead) around her neck. I briskly and firmly walked her away from the kennels and began a program that included desensitization to other stimuli... namely me, the environment and other people.

Having a dog on a lead and walking, making the dog follow along will instill a leader / follower role. This does not imply dragging the dog unnecessarily, but when we want to go, we don't coax the dog, we go and they follow. Some people find this cruel, but picking a dog up is a good way to get bit and leaving a dog laying on the floor is also a bit cruel. If the dog has a medical condition that inhibits its ability to walk we must be sensitive to that. I'm talking about a dog's refusal to walk. Whether scared or dominant, we don't want the dog to form an association that it has an option for negative or stubborn behavior. It is exactly that behavior that is going to get the dog killed. Please understand my position here is not to be a jerk to the dog, but instead to

give the dog a chance at life. Children will oftentimes fall off of a bicycle, but need to get back on.

Another aspect I feel strongly about is not forcing interaction upon the dog. In other words, the dog must be near me, but is not required to be handled or touched by me. One of the biggest mistakes that people make is forcing *contact* and *coddling* onto a stressed-out dog. If a dog is afraid of people, I don't like the old concept of *have strangers give the dog treats*. All this symbolizes in the dog's mind is that I hate people and they have something I want (treats). Maybe I'll bite them to get my treats. Behavior modification is about strategy not stupidity. Also, it is crucial for the dog to relate everything in the world as it relates to our relationship. Simply put, if I say a person is safe, the dog doesn't have to make that decision. The dog does not have to like strangers, but I require the dog to be neutral to other people and other dogs.

Dogs that have issues with people need to build a trust with one person FIRST, that person should be the primary handler. This relationship should be based on fairness and trust. That means, feeding first and foremost. Hand feeding is the best option if it can be done without risking the safety of the handler and if time permits. I am a firm believer in hand-feeding dogs to cement a solid relationship and build trust. This can be done at any age and should be done for at least 10 days to start the relationship. I understand this cannot be done in shelter, but in foster homes and forever homes it is a great way to build a solid relationship very quickly.

During the trust building phase we don't rush physical contact until the dog seeks it out. Once they do, we offer slight contact and then remove ourselves and see if the dog pursues. If they do, we can accept the fact that the dog is warming up to us. Getting emotional or mushy with the dog now is a recipe for disaster. At this point we can start giving the dog some direction and requiring an action from the dog in order to get a reward, be that affection or a treat. We do not tolerate any acts of dominance that are exhibited in an aggressive manner. It is not uncommon for dogs to push a little once they get over that initial fear hurdle. We want to remain neutral and able to give the dog the structure that he needs.

Once we have trust from the dog we can start working on engagement, which is getting the dog to pay attention to us. The prime example of this is a dog that looks into your eyes with the expression, "What shall I do now?" Here we can start basic training and mild socialization.

During the socialization phase we start with little or no trigger stimuli. So, if the dog has an issue with men, don't walk him up to a man – yet. Getting the dog around other people and re-enforcing the engagement and relationship we've built thus far will show the dog that we have his best interests at heart. Once the dog can focus back on you when you ask, you can introduce the trigger stimuli at a distance. This should be done at a safe enough distance to avoid conflict in the dog's mind. The dog should offer a behavior such as looking back at me, whether freely or with a verbal or mild physical cue. This action can be rewarded with praise or treat.

I can promise you that the dog will bark at the person or other stimuli if introduced too quickly, and that will scare some people, so it's best to set the stage and prepare by having someone help you. Start by walking the dog by the stimuli at a comfortable distance. The dog should look

back at you when you ask. Even if the dog barks at the stimuli, redirect him back to you. Ask the person not to engage the dog, no eye contact, no talking and certainly no treats.

If the dog begins his patterned behavior, wait and continuously redirect the dog back to you. Eventually, the dog will calm down, this will generally come at the point when the dog is either tired of barking / acting out or when he sees that the other person is not a threat. At this point you can give the dog a treat, wait a beat or two and then remove the dog for a brief moment. Give the dog some re-enforcement and bring him back to the stimuli. I use an assuring tone like **GOOD** when I offer the treat. Upon the re-introduction to the stimuli we are prone to see the same behavior, but it should last a little less time. We can engage the person and ignore the dog or give a slight correction. A firm **NO** and a leash correction is acceptable, but we don't use a harsh correction because it can easily be transferred in the dog's mind. That is to say that the dog can feel the correction and, in drive, feel that the correction is either from, or as a result of the other person. This will have an adverse effect on our training. We must be certain that the dog is crystal clear that the correction is coming from me.

There are countless issues that I've solved using this method including negative association to objects, people and other dogs. The key is that no matter what the trigger stimuli is, it is never removed while the dog is in drive. And furthermore, I don't believe in having the object offer treats to the dog. The treats come from ME... and only me. It is I who makes the dog safe and I will reward the dog for his behavior. Once this behavior is on the path to correction and the dog trusts me in the situation I may allow the other person to offer the dog a treat, but this is a long way out. It can generally be done when the dog is building trust to others and we see this when the dog seeks out interaction with the other person. Removing the dog from the stimuli that triggers his negative behavior reinforces the dog's negative behavior. He must learn that this object, person or environment means him no harm. Then, and only then, do we remove the dog from the item.

I had a dog that hated bicycles. He would growl and lunge at them. I spent many weekends sitting on PCH as hundreds of bicycles drove by feeding my dog treats and redirecting him back to me. Eventually he saw that bicycles were nothing to be afraid of.

I don't believe in rushing training, but I also don't believe in beleaguering the point to death either. Training should move along and we need to remain neutral and not emotional. The simple solution is to build trust with the dog and then transfer that trust onto the stimuli that triggers the dog. If we take a super sensitive approach and coddle the dog, we are not strengthening the dog's mind in a manner that will instill confidence. And it is confidence and respect that will eventually cure the problem. On the other hand using an overly firm method can have a catastrophic effect as the dog may show temporary signs of resolve only to snap back to his former behavior.

Fear-based aggression is usually based on a lack of trust. This lack of trust often times stems from a dog that was not properly socialized or one that had a negative experience during socialization. A great example of this is leash aggression / dog-to-dog aggression. Many dogs who have issues with other dogs were bitten when they were on a leash or play turned too rough at an early imprint stage. It is the lack of trust that we address before we address the aggression.

If the dog shows aggression once we establish trust, we can work on that separately. Training to gain trust is best done with the custodian of the dog, as often times it does not transfer directly from one handler to another. That is to say if I build trust with a clients dog and hand him back, he trusts me – not the owner. We can use trust steppingstones: first you trust me, and then you trust the next person I hand the leash to. Each step along the way requires a new intro to trust.

Again, I do stress that aggression is something that should be dealt with firmly, fairly and immediately. Aggression does not get better and it does not go away on its own. Aggression only gets worse. If a dog shows one or two signs of it, it's a roadmap of what's to come. If it is nipped quickly, it's a much easier fix than letting it fester. There are thousands of dogs killed in shelters every single day because people let the behavior progress, ignored it, or worse yet, felt that giving the dog a correction for stupid behavior is cruel.

The cruelest things we do are ignoring behaviors in hopes that they will go away. Dealing with aggression must be done in a non-emotional way. Similar to a professional boxer, they don't get mad when their opponent lands a punch, they simply counter. Getting emotional is severely damaging to the dog and oftentimes will trigger a counter behavior. The dog is in drive, you get mad and emotional with the dog, and that will put the dog further into drive or sometimes makes the dog turn back and bite you.

Bear in mind the size and strength of the dog you are dealing with. If you can't control the dog, you'll need help. Putting yourself at risk is not in anyone's best interest. Hooking an electric collar up to the dog because you feel that levels the playing field is a stupid choice. It's not that I don't believe in remote collars, I do, but they must be properly used. They need to be properly introduced to the dog and the user must understand how to use them. In the future I'll write an article on the proper use of an electric collar.

Build trust and develop a relationship with a dog before you begin training. Engagement over training...

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:

<http://www.boundangels.org>

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