

Adolescence

Social and Emotional Development

Time and Space

After investing many weeks socialising your baby puppy it can be quite a shock if at about 5 months old he suddenly reacts by backing away or barking at things. It can be ordinary things like bin bags, or people carrying shopping bags, or something as normal as a new plant pot in the garden which now needs a 10 meter detour to get past or seeing strangers really as strangers. The hormonal changes which will be fluctuating wildly from this age are thought to be the cause for this wariness. Had there been any gaps in the early socialising and schooling or if the puppy showed any uncertainty in his temperament it will become much more apparent during the juvenile and adolescent development stages. Backing away or barking can be interpreted by worried owners as the pup being frightened or becoming aggressive. In fact in most cases it is just the confused young dog using different behaviours for the same result, which is to keep the cause of his concern at a distance. The more this strategy is used the stronger it becomes (read the socialization document on our website http://www.gsdleague.co.uk/companion_dog_section.html) and use the same careful handling advice if your young dog shows sudden spookiness towards anything to avoid this behaviour becoming a habit.

Trying Times

By 10 months old a German Shepherd looks physically like an adult but they are not mentally mature. A behaviour that may have been allowed such as the cute little puppy dragging the owner to greet every passerby or dog is now unacceptable. This is not a time for harsh punishment. The growing adolescent dog is not being willfully naughty; he is being driven by complex hormonal and neural changes. Puppies with very sound temperaments and well socialised early on mature from puppies to adult dogs without any real problems, but most adolescent dogs will become more independent and interested in what is going on all around wanting to investigate different sights and scents. Maintaining focus and concentration can be difficult for the adolescent dog. If the once attentive puppy seems to have forgotten all previously learnt social skills and words especially come, now is the time to build on your relationship and communication with the young dog.

Back to Basics

It is important to keep training consistent and simple without introducing high demands. Short sessions concentrating on going over behaviours such as come, sit, down, wait, leave,

rewarding him well for responding as you want. Daily walks incorporating lots of play will help you compete for his attention which will be on every scent wafting his way. Make sure the play has some rules. If using a ball or tug he should drop it when told and not just grab it from you. Teaching him self-control in a calm, patient way can help avoid undesirable behaviour caused by his exuberance in a variety of situations.

Lead off Switch off

Before you take the lead off get him to sit and wait calmly. Avoid letting him run off as soon as the lead is removed as unclipping the lead becomes a signal to stop engaging with you. To keep the connection with your dog have a toy ready to develop the habit that when the lead is unclipped he immediately looks to you for a good game and fun activity. If his motivation is food, quickly say his name in an upbeat tone and reward his attention with several small treats before giving him permission to go off. Of course he needs some free time to explore and “just be a dog” but don’t walk along thinking of tonight’s tea or worse still looking at your phone. Interact with your dog, randomly call him to you reward him and send him off again, have some fun recalls, hide and call him to find you to strengthen coming back. Hide his toy and send him to find it, let him use his amazing scenting abilities. The more he engages with you the more he will ignore distractions. Including low-arousing activities which focus on mental stimulation such as scent training help to channel energy and calm an overactive young dog.

Other Dogs

When on the lead some adolescent dogs start to bark or lunge at unfamiliar dogs. The cause is often the combination of the young dog’s excitement and frustration at not being able to communicate properly with the other dog because of a tight lead and the owner unintentionally making the situation worse. Worried their dog is being aggressive many owners now try to avoid other dogs and get anxious at the sight of an approaching dog so immediately tighten the lead, stiffen their body get very stressed, telling their dog to leave in an angry tone. In a split second the dog will notice all the tension from the owner, look to see what caused it and see the other dog, now a negative association is being learnt escalating the dog’s reactive behaviour, which the owner inadvertently has reinforced many times. This is quite a common scenario.

Making Changes

Changing your reactions will help control or even change the problem behaviour. When taking your dog out be aware of your own anxiety and body signals, remain calm do not tense up and start jerking on the lead at the sight of another dog. Be aware of your dog’s body language, don’t wait for him to bark before re-directing his attention to you by giving a command or sound he responds to in a cheerful, upbeat tone. Either walk briskly on keeping his attention on

you or put him in a sit keeping a slack lead, tension on the lead encourages aggressive behaviour. A slack lead does not mean giving the dog the full length of the lead. Keep your arms relaxed and hold the lead close to the collar so that if needed you can quickly control the dog without a constant tight lead. If at any time the dog becomes over excited or anxious a simple but effective method of changing his emotional state is to change his body posture with firm, slow

strokes from his muzzle to his head, ears, hackles, returning his body posture to a more neutral position. This is not petting the dog. Although he needs to practice walking past other dogs without reacting, his social skills with dogs must have a chance to develop with positive interactions with dogs of good temperament that will not hurt the enthusiastic adolescent who is still learning how to greet other dogs and can be a bit over the top, and clumsy and his very important appeasement signals need refining to avoid conflict. Some dogs are not as tolerant towards an adolescent dog as they would be towards a very young puppy.

Forgive Forgetting

The natural process of growing up can bring a few annoying changes to the dogs general response and attitude. Owners can get frustrated and angry and over correct what they feel is disobedience. This will quickly break down the dogs trusting relationship with his owner. He may just have been distracted or excited and will not understand his owner's aggression. Although it is important to establish rules and appropriate behaviour enhance the relationship with your dog instead by remaining calm and being patient as you guide and show him how to behave.

Going Forward

Adolescence is a temporary phase and gradually you will notice he is quicker to respond to you and good behaviour becomes a habit as he matures into a sociable companion dog.

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