

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

THOUGHTS ON FOSTERING DOGS

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All Dogs Bite

Yes, all dogs bite – even yours! Biting is a natural defense behavior for dogs. The question is, “What’s the dog’s threshold for biting?” or, “What does it take to get this dog to bite?” By creating a secure home for a dog, with all his true needs met (food, water, shelter, personal space so that he doesn’t have to ‘watch his back’ all the time, and activities to keep him occupied and comfortable), we generally increase his confidence and decrease his need to defend himself. If a dog’s threshold for biting is low, i.e., he tends to show defense behaviors often and quickly, we must work to both decrease his need to defend himself (i.e., increase tolerance) and also to increase the available options for other behaviors that he can choose in order to get himself out of situations where he feels the need to defend himself. An example would be that we would feed the dog separately from other dogs in the household, and also away from children in the household so that he doesn’t have to worry that someone is going to grab his food at any moment. Dogs can eat in their crates, and that way, you get the added benefit of making the crate seem like a pretty wonderful place – there’s dinner in there, after all! Of course, we would want to gently and consistently work with the dog so that he learns to accept the presence of people while he’s eating; I’m not sure there’s a good reason for a pet dog to have to accept another dog eating right next to him with no separation barrier. Conditioning a dog to allow people to handle his food comes later, and may require the help of a behaviorist. Please contact ESRA for help if you see hints of this type of resource guarding behavior. For our purposes, what you need to know is this: if we first help a dog to feel confident and secure that his needs will be met, he will start learning that it’s not necessary to defend himself all the time. This will help prevent problem behaviors by reducing his stress as he starts to figure out how things work in this new place he’s in now.)

Behavior Changes

When you bring a new dog into your home, even a ‘temporary’ dog, you change the entire behavior climate in your home. Your current dogs will show behavior changes, the new dog will show behavior changes, and you and your human family members will all show behavior changes. You can’t help it! There’s another entity in the home. It’s much like having visitors stay with you – you show more service behavior toward them if you like them, and you may show more defense behaviors or isolation behaviors if you don’t like them! With a new dog in the house, the best advice I can offer is to plan ahead and make sure you’re acutely aware of what your current dog(s) and the new dog are doing at every moment. If you don’t have any rules for dogs in your household, or if you don’t have steadfast and consistent rules for the dogs in your household, this is the time to institute those rules or clarify them.

If you once crated your dogs and you no longer do, it’s a good idea to go back to crating when the foster dog comes in. The reasons are simple: the foster dog is coming into a completely new situation and will do much better if the rules for dogs are easy to follow; even adult foster dogs in a new home need a little help understanding the bathroom expectations, and crating is infinitely beneficial for that purpose; crates allow each and every dog in the house to have a

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place to run to and be alone when the pressures of dealing with a new ‘crowd’ become too much – and they will! Each dog in the house needs and deserves time alone, as well as one-on-one time with an owner. It’s just too much to ask from any dog to fall into a new ‘crowd’ and mingle with them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with no ‘down time’ to de-stress. Crating also is a wonderful way to do just a little training and leadership work with the dogs every day, even on those days when you have time to do little else! Even if you put the dogs in the crates for only half an hour while you’re in the room with them – and that may well be where you have to start with a new dog who’s never been in a crate before – you’ve gained progress in the development of the dogs’ manners. You’ve asked them to go in the crate, they have, and they’ve been rewarded with a treat for doing so. You’ve then allowed them to come out of the crate when you were ready, and they’ve gotten one repetition of you being the benevolent leader who dictates what will happen and when, rewarding generously for cooperation. This speaks volumes to dogs!

If you allow your dogs on the furniture, it’s a good idea to either withhold that privilege for a while when a new dog comes in, or to at least make sure that they understand that they are allowed on the furniture only when you ask them to come up onto it, and that they must get off when you ask them to do so. A new dog cannot understand what the requirements are for furniture privileges until he or she has been in your home for at least a couple of weeks, and furniture is a prime target for dogs to guard. While it’s OK for dogs to protect a resource from another dog, it’s never OK for a dog to protect anything from a human – and with stress levels already high from the new dog coming into the home, this is an area that’s ripe for resource guarding as the dogs begin to sort out what the rules are going to be.

Put the new dog on a leash in order to keep track of him/her if necessary. It’s fine to use a leash indoors, if you need to make sure the new dog doesn’t wander off to chew up something or go to the bathroom somewhere he shouldn’t. Drop the leash and let it drag behind him if you don’t need it at the moment, but it’s there if you need to guide the dog along when you move to another room. A new foster dog does not need free run of your entire home, and that much freedom may, in fact, add more pressure to an already – stressful time of change. Let him have more freedom bit by bit, as he gets more comfortable and you’ve dealt with the subtle changes among your family members, both 2-legged and 4-legged.

I’m a big fan of reducing the scope of privileges for all dogs in the home when the new one comes in, and gradually doling out privileges as the dogs earn them and as I get to know both the new dog and the new behavior of the current dogs. You are likely to see guarding behavior from your own dog, even if you’ve never seen it before, when a new dog comes in. You may also see other types of behavioral changes. This is because of the subtle changes going on in the behavioral structure of the group. Change brings stress, whether it’s easily discerned or not. Think of your home as having a flowchart of behavioral interactions laid over it: Dog interacts with owner, owner’s spouse, owner’s children, other current dog, and family cat. Now, Dog must continue to interact with all those participants and must also learn how to interact with the new dog. All this must occur within the same physical and emotional space previously occupied by one less dog, and also within the same 24-hour day in which there was once one less dog. There’s an interloper! And your job is to have the interloper (the new foster dog) move from the

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given state of questionable security and confidence in what may or may not happen next in his life, to a state of confidence in what to expect from you as well as the other dogs and people in the home; we all hope this transition occurs while the security and confidence of your current dog(s) as well as the comfort and security of the human members of your household is maintained. This is a tall order! Fostering is no easy task.

Dog ‘Fights’

As the behavior changes I’ve mentioned begin to show themselves, you will almost certainly see growling, lip-lifting, and teeth-baring from both the foster dog and your own dog(s). This is not a dog fight! This is dogs communicating with each other. What probably preceded these more obvious exchanges between the dogs is a lot of very subtle body language. Dogs perceive their own personal space much like we humans do. If another dog comes too close, a dog will generally divert his eyes, turn his head away, and then turn his body to the side or walk away – usually in that order. You can easily miss these signals, but most dogs notice them and often respond in kind. When two dogs meet each other for the first time, one of the best possible outcomes is that they briefly sniff and then turn and walk away; this is an indication that each dog understands the other’s need for personal space and is respecting that. It’s a little like humans exchanging a brief nod and smile, to indicate that we tolerate the presence and respect the needs of another human – but we don’t know them well, and have no need to have a lengthy interaction at the moment. When the dogs are a little more comfortable with each other, they’ll move toward play behaviors. They will always need to be able to indicate that they don’t want to play right now, though! This is often where we see growling and lip-lifting and other things that are easily misconstrued as fighting behaviors. If a dog shows the body language mentioned above, and the other dog continues indicating that he’d like to play, the first dog often needs to say more clearly, “I really don’t want to play with you right now!” It’s completely fair for a dog to give a growl, lift a lip, and even to show teeth or snap the air if it’s necessary to get another dog out of his or her space. It’s just communication. {The worst dog fights are often very quiet; if dogs are interested in killing each other, they don’t usually waste energy making a lot of noise – they just go right to it.} Dogs will often move to putting their mouths on the other dog, even to pinning them to the ground, if necessary to let them know they want them to go away. This is all fair! Unless the dogs are breaking each other’s skin, it’s best to let them sort things out between themselves. It’s often noisy, and can be scary if we’re not prepared for it; but if we continually break things up, we can cause conflict because the dogs’ instinct is to defend themselves (as is ours!) and we’re disallowing that and indicating that they should allow another dog to have his way with them. This is really unfair, and nearly impossible for the dogs to understand. If we have a visitor or co-worker who continually enters our personal space, perhaps touching us more than we like, ignoring our efforts to turn away or walk away, or to stay out of his or her presence, we may have no other recourse than to tell them verbally that we don’t like this behavior and need for the other person to stop it. If the other person continues to touch us and invade our space, we’re likely to raise our voices and say something along the lines of, “Hey – I’ve asked you to cut that out, and you’d better do so now!” This is similar to what our dogs are trying to communicate, and completely understandable and fair – they don’t have language to use, and are sending that message the only way they can. Watch the dogs closely and look for those initial

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subtle signs they give each other, indicating that they want to play or don't; and become aware of how quickly or slowly another dog 'gets' that message and changes his or her behavior. They learn and get better at communication the more they practice it; as two dogs get to know each other better, they can use more and more subtle means, often to the point where it seems like they're doing a dance together and we can barely perceive the communications they exchange. But we have to let them express themselves as they need to initially; they'll work it out.

Bullies

Some dogs are bullies and, while they may not have the loud and noisy back-and-forth communications I've described above, they may stare at other dogs, continually invade their space, and tend to stand their ground as another dog tries to communicate his or her need to be left alone. This is a situation that doesn't work well in a multi-dog household, and if you see this type of behavior with your foster dog or with your own dog when the new foster comes in, it's best to contact ESRA and make a change. Your dog may well get along with another dog – but just not this one. It takes two to tango, and sometimes two dogs just aren't properly equipped to deal with each other.

Relaxation

All dogs in the household should be able to relax from time to time. As I've stated above, crates are wonderful for providing a place for the dogs to go to get some time off– even if you have to send them there for a little relaxation. But you should ideally see the dogs spending more and more time together – at first initiated by you, but seeking each other out or at least tolerating the presence of each other over time. If you're seeing any dog in your household spending more and more time alone and away from the others after a couple of weeks have gone by, there could well be some conflict and stress hanging about between the dogs in your household. ESRA can help you evaluate and deal with this – either by helping you make some further changes to help everyone feel more secure, or by taking the foster dog out of your home and setting you up with another one who fits better.

If You Need To Break Up A Real Fight:

As I've stated, if the dogs got along well at the initial introduction and you're giving them plenty of time apart while giving them supervised interaction among themselves, you will most likely need to let the dogs sort things out. IF you see the need to intervene, DO NOT put your hands near the dogs' mouths! Get the water hose and turn it on them, or use a wooden chair or piece of lumber to attempt to separate them. If two people are available and the dogs have tails, you can have each person carefully grab a tail and drag the dogs slowly and calmly apart so that they don't turn around and bite you or the other person. NEVER grab collars or try to use your hands to pry a mouth open. It's just too dangerous. And remember: this is for your own safety first, but it's also for the dog's own good. Once a dog bites, everything changes. She's discovered a behavior that works for her, but it's also one that's completely unacceptable in the human world in which she lives; it's a conflict that's better avoided.

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Making The Foster Dog A Better Pet: Evaluation

One of the reasons for putting dogs in foster homes is to evaluate their suitability for adoption into certain types of homes. We like to have foster parents pay close attention to their behavior, in their interactions with other dogs as well as in their interactions with people of all types (old, young, people of different races and abilities, people engaged in different activities), and with the environment (crowds, vacuum cleaners, brooms, noises, walking surfaces, etc.) Of course, we don't want to just throw the dog into various situations that he may or may not have encountered in the past – we want to introduce him gently to new things.

Prevention

Although English Springer Spaniels are cute, beautiful, have big sad eyes, are affectionate and sweet, pretty, or make us feel sorry for them, they are dogs in the end. Foster dogs are by nature dogs that we know little about. They may come directly from a shelter or from a previous owner who did no training and had no rules for them. They may come from being tied in the back yard. They may have had loving owners who did teach them rules and manners – but we often have no way of knowing any of this. For this reason, it's always best to initially perceive the new foster dog as purely an unknown dog. Keep your emotions and imagination locked away at first. Have the new dog sleep in a crate; don't allow him on the furniture; teach him the rules of the house. A new dog often has what we call a 'honeymoon period' of about two weeks, during which he doesn't really show us what he's all about – he behaves in a reserved manner. If we use this period as a training period, gently communicating the rules of the house and what we expect of dogs in our household, it's a blessing! In two weeks, you can go a long way with a dog in terms of training – you can teach him to sit pretty well, carefully show him where you'd like for him to go to the bathroom and reward him for doing so in the right place, introduce him to his crate which is the best place on earth, teach him that you are the source of all food and toys and affection and that he can earn those things by sitting, and most importantly through all this, instill in him the sense that he will be taken care of and doesn't have to worry about things. After the honeymoon period ends and he begins to loosen up and show you what he's really made of, you'll have set everything up so that he knows what to expect from you and the household – this makes his further training go much faster, and reduces the chance that he'll begin to show many undesirable behaviors, like resource guarding, counter-surfing, etc.! And you are training both your own dog and this foster dog; whether you mean to do so or not, you are training him every minute you're with him. Every experience he has with you shapes his behavior for the next experience; if you're observant and aware of what's going on, you'll be helping him to become the wonderful pet dog we all know he can be, while speeding his journey to his forever home and ensuring his success once he gets there!

THANK YOU FOR FOSTERING AN ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL!