

Problem Dogs

By Dee Schmidt

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Do you know that a dog is "mean?" A "biter?" Have you ever questioned whether he bites out of fear, because he is truly mean, or simply because he has not been taught that biting is not socially acceptable behavior? You will eventually, if you haven't already, see all three -- the really "mean" dog almost never; the "fear biter" occasionally; and the ones who simply don't know any better somewhat frequently (usually still in the puppy stage).

There is a good deal of responsibility accompanying the decision to bring home that cute, irresistible, loving puppy. He must be provided with food and shelter. He needs to see the veterinarian periodically. He asks only for your love in return for a life-time of loyalty, companionship, and devotion. But beyond food and shelter, what is there? To start with...there are laws governing ownership (licensing, leash laws, etc.), there are social obligations (he must be friendly toward others, not cause a nuisance, and not leave his "calling card" in your neighbor's yard); and there are day-to-day relationships between you and your dog and your family.

A young dog can almost be compared to a young child. He must be taught what is right and what is wrong. What is socially acceptable behavior and what is not. He must be socialized when young (be taught not to be afraid of strangers). A dog who sees only his own people and his own yard is afraid of what he doesn't know. He should be taken for a daily walk on a leash. He needs the exercise, your special time and attention, and to see the world outside his own environment. He needs to build up confidence in people and in himself. He needs to be taught that puppy teeth are sharp and can hurt. To a dog, mouthing your hand is a sign of affection. He must understand it has to be done gently. As a responsible dog and pet owner, you should get a good book on dog behavior and make an effort to understand his needs and instincts. You should enroll him in an obedience training class to help you both learn.

A dog (even a very small puppy) wants to give you his respect. But instinct tells him you must earn it. He will love you nonetheless and perhaps even more if given a definite set of rules to live by and a consistent routine to follow. A dog will do, or will not do, exactly what he is taught. This is a very simple thing to say. But think it over carefully. If he is allowed to bite, growl, bark, or play roughly as a puppy (because he's cute, it's fun, or whatever reason), he will be led to believe this behavior is acceptable, even desired, when he is grown. A 50-plus pound dog who bites, growls, barks, or throws you to the ground to play is a fearsome sight and can cause panic in the eyes of your neighbors. Cute puppies are allowed in your lap and up on the furniture. As a full-grown dog, he is no longer cute, he may be too large for your lap, and he may ruin the furniture. These lessons must start immediately. Teaching him to play gently, to keep off the furniture, sit quietly when told, to act the gentleman at all times are as important to him as housebreaking is to you. A full-grown dog who bites a stranger out of fear is not a lost cause. He can be taught, through patience, understanding, and training, to feel confidence and socialize properly.

One of the saddest stories recently heard comes from a vet. A family with a son approximately 8 years old brought their dog in to be "put down." The family was in tears -- the dog, having been beaten almost senseless, in pain and confusion, seemed to know (with a dog's special awareness) and to accept with resignation that his final farewell to a brief life was now at hand. The vet recalled a young, boisterous puppy being brought in for puppy shots and recommending obedience training class. The family thought it was too much trouble and expense at the time.

Let's call this dog 'Rex.' As a puppy, Rex was just full of fun. The young boy, his boy, played with him, and they wrestled and rolled over and over on the floor and in the yard. When his boy complained that Rex's puppy teeth were sharp and hurt, the family said, 'Don't worry, Rex will outgrow it.' Rex would growl and his boy would growl back. It was great fun. When Rex became older, he accidentally ripped the shirtsleeve of a neighbor's youngster. He was not disciplined and did not understand all the fuss -- though his family had to replace the shirt. Rex was now forced to stay in his own back yard, and the gate was kept locked. The neighborhood kids no longer came to play. Rex was now called a "mean" dog. He was lonesome and didn't understand his isolation.

One day, at one year of age, Rex found the gate open. He ran joyously to the front yard just in time to see a neighbor's son riding his bicycle down the street. Rex made a fast charge and a quick leap and brought down his old playmate, bicycle and all, and stood over the boy. The boy was afraid and kicked Rex and hurt him. Rex defended himself and bit back, trying to stop the kicking leg. The neighbors came and beat Rex until he crawled away along, hurt and confused - he had only wanted to play. The neighbor's son was also hurt and afraid. So here Rex was, his last few minutes with his only true friend, the vet. In a few painless seconds Rex was gone forever from this life. But how absolutely senseless. Had no one cared enough about Rex to teach him what he needed to know? Rex was no longer confused about the rules of society...the vet had finally freed this neglected and misunderstood dog from the punishment of human ignorance.

If you have a dog – puppy or adult – It's always a good idea to take him to an Obedience Training Class. It is your responsibility to see to it that your dog becomes a gentleman, a good neighbor, a dog you can depend on, a dog you can enjoy, and a dog others can enjoy.