

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DOG OBEDIENCE INSTRUCTORS, INC.

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Dogs With No Confidence ***Have They Really Been Abused?*** Norma Simpson Rust, NADOI #459

In my 23 years of teaching Dog Obedience Classes to the general public, I have worked with numerous dogs who appeared to have been abused. Anyone involved with a rescue organization has encountered countless numbers of these “abused” dogs. Typically, these dogs will bark when approached, try to run away, and often bite if one persists in trying to touch them. These dogs have learned that the best way to keep people away is to act or be aggressive. For the fearful dog, the best defense is a good offense. I, along with most rescue workers, initially thought that such fearful aggression was surely the result of abuse. I questioned the owners about what they had done with their dog when it was under 16 weeks of age; did they take it everywhere with them, etc. I discovered that they had never taken the dog anywhere in these formative months. It made me rethink the cause of such behaviors.

The real problem is lack of socialization. Everyone I talked to about this problem would answer that they had a lot of company at their house, so their pup was well socialized. This displays a misunderstanding of what it takes to socialize a dog properly. The worst cases of this occur when someone comes to our classes with a dog that they bought at a pet shop who was already past four months of age. They are often too frightened to walk. We would put this kind of a dog into our puppy class, because they weren't afraid of puppies. They could gain some confidence and some learning was able to take place. We could make them better, but could never make them very confident. To build confidence in a puppy it takes three new experiences a week plus the training activities that included behavior-shaping techniques.

Pups have come to class too stressed to take a treat, looking very much like they were abused. After a week of what I call “going places”, they come back more confident and outgoing. If the pup gets to 16 weeks without resolving this lack of confidence, it will spend its life acting like it has been abused.

I recently had a dog in my agility class who was a one-year-old wire Jack Russell Terrier acquired from a local rescue group. On his cage it said, "not suitable for children, men or other dogs". He had been adopted five times and been returned each time. He came in the door of our training facility barking and growling, and it was obvious to me he was afraid. After about three months of obedience and agility training, he went to a match and won ribbons in both rally and pre-novice classes. This is a classic case of an un-socialized dog. The training that he received made a big difference in his ability to function in the real world. His new owner was very dedicated to making him as good a dog as she could. He ended up a much happier dog than before, but he was never going to be the dog he could have been with a proper start in life. Until fear is overcome, there can be no communication and therefore no learning is taking place.

Unfortunately, many rescue dogs have not been properly socialized, and therefore fit this "fear" profile. Training does build confidence, and you can make most of them better, but you can never make them completely right.

I always have to learn the hard way and did so with a six-month-old Border Collie sired by my dog. The owners of this dog called and told me that this pup was aggressive, weird, destructive and all-around incorrigible. I suggested training to them, but that was not an option. I subsequently purchased this dog, confident that I could "fix" him. It was through this dog that I discovered that I could make him better, but he was never going to be the way he could have been. I thought I could put some training on him and find him a good home. I found him a good home all right, mine, but I could never completely overcome his fearfulness. He was always afraid of children. The whites of his eyes would show if a child tried to approach him. I trained him to a Companion Dog title, but he was never confident enough to jump and would stutter step up to an 8" board.

In the last months of his life, he came so close to biting me in the face that it was scary. He was sleeping on the floor and when I tried to wake him to put him out for the last time of the evening, I startled him. He lunged at my face and the teeth snapped too close for comfort. It amazed me that the person who had him the first six months of his life had more influence on his behavior than I, who owned him until he was fifteen, did. I trained and trained and trained him (more than any average person might have done), but really to no avail.

It is good to remember that there is this short eight-week window of opportunity to socialize your dog and make it a confident and outgoing individual. If this is done, even a dog that suffers abuse in his life could distinguish between abusive and normal treatment and have appropriate reactions.

The National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors is interested in improving dog obedience training and instructing. Won't you join us? For more information on NADOI, the requirements for membership, or the name of the NADOI instructor nearest you, visit our web site at www.nadoi.org. You may also write us at: NADOI, PMB 369, 729 Grapevine Hwy, Hurst TX 76054-2805 (attn: Corresponding Sec). Please address reprint requests to the NADOI Notes editor.