

Article 23

Canine shyness can be genetic but can be overcome

Dear Gus,

We have a ten-month old female German Shepherd, Gracie. She has always been a bit shy, but over the past two or three months she has started barking at people, for example on her walk, or if new people come to visit. She has her basic commands down well, but won't listen in these situations. How can we make new experiences a pleasure for both of us?

Pat D., Orange

There sounds like a few things that could be causing this behavior. First off, Gracie may have a genetic disposition for shyness. If this is the case, you can work with her to lessen her shyness, but she will probably never be a "social butterfly". The second cause may be inconsistency in her training among family members. For example, certain behaviors may be acceptable at one time, but not another. This leads to a dog that doesn't understand what the expected behavior is, and therefore doesn't behave consistently. Lack of set routine or set expectations can increase fear in the dog, since she is looking to her other pack members (you) to tell her what to do. If the message is different at different times, she is confused and lacks confidence in how she should behave.

Consistent training is the answer. The more positive rewards, in the form of praise, Gracie gets when she remains calm with strangers, the more calm she will feel, and the more she will look to please. Don't stop having her meet strangers, instead, on your walks, keep a positive tone to your voice, and over time bring her closer to situations where she is fearful. Keep her by your side as you walk, and give her a job to do (walking quietly next to you on the leash). In the home, you can have her in the "down" position when someone comes to the door, once again, giving her a job that distracts her from the visitor. And, make sure you don't become anxious about how she will behave, since our anxiety will "flow down the leash", making her think that she should be frightened. Gradually she will come to understand that new experiences are fun, not threatening and her behavior will cease.

The magic of this approach is that Gracie will become more confident of both your leadership and herself, and will be more trusting of instruction, no matter what the situation. Confidence will not only balance her skittish behavior, it will enhance her bond with the pack (you and your family) and make her look forward to the changes each new day brings. Good luck with Gracie!

Gus

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