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GENERAL TROUBLESHOOTING PRINCIPLES

Troubleshooting behavior issues can be frustrating. There are many variables and often more than one right answer to the problem. The article that follows is a basic guideline to help work through common issues in a more consistent methodology.

For all troubleshooting we need to ask the same basic questions. The first three questions will help you determine the extent of the problem and the timeliness of the help you need to get.

Magnitude: Did the magnitude of the individual event create an immediate social, public image or safety concern?

If the answer to the magnitude question is yes, then you need to contact Julie as soon as you are reasonably able. Use your best judgment as to how immediate you reach out for contact. If your dog pulled you off your feet, this is a safety concern but would not necessitate a call on Saturday evening. Instead, just leave the dog at home until you get a chance to call on Monday. Growling over the food is a more serious issue however it is more serious in a house full of young kids than a household with two adults.

Intensity: Is the behavior intensifying or is it likely to intensify?

This tells us the behavior is getting worse and you should reach out to your mentor, club leader or PAWS directly, contacting help in that order. Once again, use your best judgment. An intensifying growl could be tone, volume or duration of the growling. Intensifying for a shy dog could be an increasing reluctance to be touched by people, or exhibiting escape behaviors that go from looking away, to hiding behind the raisers legs to bolting in the opposite direction. While the phrase "likely to intensify" does increase the odds of receiving calls, we would rather coach you through what is or is not worth worrying over than have people not reach out for behaviors that could have been easily prevented or nipped in the bud.

Generalization: Is the behavior beginning to generalize or happen in different environments?

For problem behaviors, this is a bad thing. For desirable behaviors, this is a good thing. This is unlikely to happen quickly with problem behaviors but is all the more reason that if you do see this happening, to seek help. For example, the dog spooked at one man in a hat and now has started to act funny around all men in hats, then all hats or all men. This dog is now beginning to generalize that all hats or all men are scary and this is a problem that needs to be addressed either by yourself, mentor or club leader.

Those are the first three questions: Magnitude, Intensification, Generalization. This helps you to determine if you should seek help and how timely that help needs to be. That help may very well be from yourself. The next couple questions will help you determine if you can help yourself.

Troubleshooting at Home

After you have determined that it is not an emergency, but that you do need help because the behavior is intensifying and/or generalizing, then the next questions you ask are: what do I want the dog to do and how do I want them to do it?

What do I want the dog to do? You can't actually train the dog not to do something. For example, you don't train a dog not to pull on leash, you train them to walk nicely next to you at the heel threshold. If you find yourself saying "I don't want my dog to...", instead ask yourself what *do* you want the dog to do. Are there any exercises in the Curriculum that will help you to train the dog to perform the behavior you want? Are there any exercises the dog can perform to help you manage the dog's behavior?

How do you want them to do it? This is extremely important and a good rule of thumb is that you want them to do it politely. An example; let's say you tend to exercise the dog in the yard at a time when kids walk by and the kids are kids and it always turns into a mess. What you decide you want the dog to do is to "come" when called. How the dog is to perform that recall is by turning and moving towards you ending up in a sit in front of you, not come running back and body slamming into you.

Why are they behaving like they are? It could be argued that this question should come before What do I want the dog to do? However, the majority of the time we feel that we need an answer and a plan and NOW! This question is also difficult to answer, has a lot of gray areas and often requires extensive dog experience to answer it thoroughly and correctly.

Let's take a look at a fictitious case. The dog is barking at the end of the leash when it sees another dog. The magnitude doesn't pose risk to life or limb, the intensity is pretty consistent but he is starting to do it when he sees any dog (generalizing). What do you want the dog to do? Sit by your side? Stand at the end of the leash quietly? Look at you? You can't reach a goal you don't have. This probably won't solve the problem though. If you do enough work on name recognition, "Heel", "Back" and "Stay", you might make the dog manageable. The next step: Why are they behaving like they are? This really gets to the heart of the problem. Did you not take enough time and work on control into the building and now pup is worked up? Does pup not know how to gain access to other dogs? Is it only novel looking dogs? Small dogs?

If you can figure out what is causing the pup to act the way, you might not have to work as hard on the behaviors that you want the dog to perform and ultimately you will have to manage the dog less.

These are the questions you can begin expecting us to ask you to help you figure out your own plan of action for troubleshooting difficult behaviors.

Summary:

Gauge the magnitude, intensity, and generalization of the behavior to determine how immediate and what type of assistance you need in solving the problem.

Based on the answer, ask yourself the following questions:

What do you want the dog to do?

How do you want the dog to do it?

Why is the dog behaving like they are?

What tools/commands does the dog already understand that I can use?

What tools must I train so I can use them?