



HAPPY HOLIDAYS... FOR YOUR PETS!

Emily Fisher, CPDT-KA Scratch and Sniff Canine Services, Guelph ON

Whatever your celebration, pet safety around the holidays should be a top priority. Plan ahead, keep in mind how your dog's reacted to similar situations in the past, and brainstorm strategies that will keep her safe and happy throughout the holiday season.

With the holidays often come gatherings of family and friends, and with gatherings often come overexcited dogs. If you have a nagging feeling that Rex is going to cause great embarrassment – knocking over Great Aunt Mabel, drooling on Uncle Bob's carefully ironed slacks as he sits under the table hopefully, jumping up on everyone else, and making off with the turkey (or Tofurkey?) – this is training that should have started after the party last year! In the meantime, hire a reputable positive-reinforcement trainer to visit you in your home and show you how to manage Fido when the guests arrive. A simple solution that will make your life easier is to purchase a baby gate to keep Fido out of the front entrance. Use that same gate to keep him in the bedroom while you sit down for dinner. A party is no place to undertake training (who wants to, anyway?) so you will need to have training and management strategies in place long before the first guest walks up the front steps.

Strategies to prevent fear and aggression are very important considerations for any dog, even those who “would never...” It's never nice to think that trusty old Missy could ever growl, never

mind lay her teeth on human skin, but dogs can't speak English. They can't pull us aside for a discussion about how the little cousins keep teasing them or how your uncle keeps trying to kiss their nose or how they just had her tail trod upon. Dogs speak their own language, and unfortunately we humans aren't always aware of the whispers before the shout.

Alcohol, a common ingredient to spice up any party, can also change your guests' judgment when it comes to interacting with Missy. They smell funny, act funny, and might take some liberties that they wouldn't otherwise, resulting in a fearful or aggressive response from Missy. Some dogs just aren't partiers and would prefer to be closed into an upstairs bedroom with their bed, a bowl of water and a few tasty stuffed Kongs. You might feel bad that she is left out of the festivities, but if her options are chewing on a Kong alone in a room or being stressed and upset, I can guarantee that she'd choose the former. Keep in mind that most dogs don't know how to make their own space when they feel uncomfortable, so you may have to take an active role in leading her up to the room rather than expecting her to find her own sanctuary. Just because she stays in the chaos doesn't mean she is enjoying it.

Another important consideration for any seasonal gathering is environmental safety. Decorations and gifts can be ingested, lights nibbled upon, and candles tipped over. If that gate isn't up to prevent Fido from jumping on guests, he might invite himself out for an evening stroll. Door dashing can be very dangerous for your dog and certainly a good buzz kill for a party as well! (For strategies to deal with door dashing before the party begins, please see the “Ask the Trainer” article in the March 2012 issue of the Speaking of Dogs newsletter.) Keep all decorations out of reach of dogs, who are prone to sampling them, and keep all chocolate and other toxic foods well out of reach. Be sure to ask guests if their parcels

contain chocolates, and place those in a special location high off the floor.

Take time out of your busy day to make sure your dog's needs are met. If he needs an hour in the park to settle on a regular day, he will certainly need that on the day of the party, no matter how hectic your schedule! Make sure that he has his needs met, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Your dog might just like to sit on the couch and cuddle, and this is important. Address anxiety in your dog compassionately, as some dogs are easily triggered by their owner's moods. Maybe a dog like this needs to go up to the bedroom with his Kongs long before the guests ever arrive. Boarding is a great option for a dog who has a history of being anxious, whether fearful or aggressive, at large gatherings. Most boarding places fill up quickly around the holidays, so book early to avoid last-minute panic. See if a friend or family member can house your dog for the day. If someone is coming to your party and will be leaving an empty house, perhaps they wouldn't mind if your dog spent the evening there. Calming aids like the Thundershirt (available in pet stores or online at <http://www.thundershirt.com/>) and D.A.P. (“Dog Appeasing Pheromone,” available over the counter from your vet or online at <http://www.adaptil.co.uk/>) are great options to use in combination with management.

My dogs aren't invited to the family party, and while I will feel a little bad walking out of the house without them, I also know it will be for their own good. Elsie is weary at even small gatherings and prefers to spend her time outside and away from the action. She is terrified of the sound of hiccups (that's a work in progress!), and I can't imagine that I can stop a room full of 20 people from hiccupping after a meal! Rather than subject her to that evening of hiccup-induced terror, knowing also that she is not comfortable in large gatherings, I am sure that she will be perfectly happy to spend her evening in a quiet house chewing on Kongs.