

I WANT MY DOG TO JUST “GET ALONG” WITH EVERYONE



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When we send out questionnaires to clients who sign up for behaviour modification training because their dog is reactive toward dogs or people, we always ask the question: “What are your expectations from the training sessions?” The title of this article is the most common answer that I have seen, and every time I see it confuses me: what does “getting along” mean?

For some it may mean the dog being able to handle nose-to-nose contact with every dog he meets and tolerating strangers patting him on the head. For someone else it may mean being able to pass other dogs safely in the street at a distance of six feet and the dog performing a “sit stay” while the owner talks to a stranger. These are two very different expectations, and guess which one is more realistic? The former I’m afraid just may never happen, whereas a trainer and owner can make a good, realistic training plan to get the latter started.

The last couple of newsletters had excellent articles on the importance of management in training and how fear and anxiety can take over the dog’s brain if they don’t have appropriate management steps in their lives. Whatever the plan to help the dog “get along,” making the environment as predictable as possible is the first step. Effective training cannot take place if you or your dog is constantly afraid of

what might be lurking around the next corner. And when we try to figure out what the scary monster or cause for frustration around that corner is, we have to turn to our dog for the answer. Unfortunately, we cannot decide it for them.

What does our dog want?

The critical question to ask is: does our dog want to be in the situation we want to put them in? We decide to take them to the dog park, make them approach another dog on the sidewalk, or let a stranger come to them with outstretched arms. In urban environments, we expect our dog to be able to handle all of the above, often even after they have had an outburst of barking, lunging, and snarling. All of these warnings signs should tell us that the dog does not appreciate the situation.

Of course, life happens and reactive outbursts can be unavoidable sometimes, but deliberately pushing it certainly does not help. I’m not a saint though; I recently forced my older dog into a situation even though he told me that he wasn’t comfortable. Last week we saw a neighbour’s female dog, whom my dog usually gets along with. Because of the good previous history, I let the interaction happen despite the fact that my dog was hyper-vigilant and stiff in the body, two clear signs of stress. Because of his overall stress level, he approached the other dog straight in her face, gave her a hard stare, and snarled, none of which is polite. The incident was not his fault; it was mine for not respecting his stress signals and what HE wanted me to do.

Understanding canine body language is essential

The take home from the above scenario is that in order to help our dogs cope with their triggers, we need to learn what their body language means, respect it, and intervene before their emotions escalate.

This is the only way to achieve a “getting along” plan, no matter what the “getting along” plan is. What the stress signals look like exactly depends on the dog. There are excellent resources out there on canine body language, and you can find some listed below this article.

The beauty of dogs is that they never lie; if they are saying that they are uncomfortable they truly ARE uncomfortable. The goal of training is to teach the dog to be able to cope with gradually tougher situations, but this only happens when we learn to respect their wants and wishes. Of course, you never know, maybe a more optimistic “getting along” prognosis is a possibility for your dog after consistent training – but that is for the dog to decide.

To find out more about canine body language and what your dog is trying to tell you, check out the following online resources:

- <http://drsophiayin.com/videos/tag/dog+body+language>
- <http://www.dogster.com/dog-training/dog-body-language>
- <http://www.petprofessionalguild.com/DogBodylanguage>
- <http://www.4pawsu.com/Video/bodylanguage.pdf>

