

Tails from the Bark Side

Ask Isa...



ASK ISA

—Isa Helfrich, German Shepherd/therapy dog (typed by Deb Helfrich, VP)

QUESTION:

Over the past several months, there have been a few questions from members about how to handle newly-developed aggression—and other problems that may or may not be aggressive (like barking).

ANSWER:

When your dog shows signs like a growl, a snap, a showing of teeth, or excessive barking, it can be frightening and embarrassing. You may want to ignore it, rationalize it, or write it off as a one time incident. These feelings are very understandable.

Aggression happens for different reasons—could be a health problem, traumatic incident, an age-related issue, or a re-surfaced past incident. It can vary in severity--but no sign of aggression is too small to ignore. However, if unaddressed, aggression could escalate—so, early attention is critical. And, on the flip side—you may think something is aggressive when it in fact may not be; dog behavior can be complex, confusing, and subtle. Aggression must be handled on a case-by-case basis--depending on the dog, the handler/owner, and when/how the behaviors are triggered.

So, what to do? Seek out an experienced animal behaviorist to assess your dog's behaviors, and to work with you and your dog. It's one thing to get advice from others about how to teach a trick or clip nails, but when you are dealing with anything that looks remotely like it could be aggressive in nature, find a professional. Your veterinarian can often make referrals.

In terms of therapy dog work, if your dog is showing a change in behavior—perhaps excessive barking, growling, showing of teeth, or fearfulness...**please cease therapy dog visits.** This is simply the safest route for the people you visit, for you, and for your dog. Even if your dog has acquired dog-to-dog issues (these do not necessarily mean a dog will be aggressive to people), it is best to cease visits anyway. A barking, out of control dog wearing a TDV bandanna isn't good for TDV, you, or your dog!

Work with a trained professional until both of you are completely confident that there are no further aggression issues. It would be advisable to seek out a TDV tester to re-test your dog to ensure that you and your dog are ready to begin working again. Also, the TDV officers and testers are available to help you too—so let us know if you are experiencing any issues with your dog.

Remember... this is nothing to be ashamed of. Perfection is not a reasonable request to ask from your dog or any dog. There could be many normal and reasonable explanations for a dog having sudden issues. There certainly is no shame or blame if you temporarily remove your dog from duty—in fact, it is the noble, responsible and safe decision to make for not only you and the individuals you are interacting with but for your dog as well.

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