

GOOD DOG!

Canine Obedience Consultants

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Case Study: Nirva/Duffer

Overview

Duffer is a pit/hound mix of approximately four years of age who was a stray. Previous history unknown. He has been in his current home for approximately two years. He was severely underfed when found and soon began showing signs of aggressive behavior toward the staff at shelter. Owners describe him as “highly reactive to stress”. The household can be stressful to Duffer as there are two other dogs which he generally gets along with, but things can get problematic at times. (The other two dogs are the alpha, Greta, a senior Great Dane, and Austin, a large hound mix. Duffer appears to be the omega of the three.) Owners admit to episodes of frustration and elevated anxiety on their own parts.

In spite of his issues, Duffer, like most dogs, also has a very sweet-natured side. He is very food motivated which I view as our most important asset, as we should be able to redirect, and through associative learning, make many normally stressful situations (some of which escalate into an almost psychotic mindset) into positive experiences.

In my initial observations, it seemed that Duffer was nervous and anxious, although I had no trouble making a friend of him. He did jump up on me as I was first ignoring him. (I allowed that without correction as I wanted him to smell me and the food I had in possession.) He was quite willing to sit obediently and look me in the eye when motivated by treats; however, it is clear that when he is in an escalated state, such as when he retreats to the laundry room, direct eye contact is viewed as threatening. He does not appear joyful to me, but rather shows a good deal of facial tension and other stress signals.

Duffer appears to be a high energy dog so much of his angst may be related to the frustration of simply needing to burn off more steam. He paces quite a lot indoors, or at least that was so in my presence. He needs to urinate frequently, more so than most dogs. (Tests by a DVM have turned up nothing abnormal.) In my view he would benefit greatly from considerably more physical exercise and mental stimulation. I do realize that there are three pet dogs in the family and that both owners work full time jobs. There is only so much time in the day, to be sure. Make no mistake, rehabilitation of a dog with so many issues, some of them serious, will require commitment, consistency and sacrifice. There has to be a high level of motivation on the part of the owners to rehabilitate the dog.

A few important points to consider:

- 1) ***You either lead or you are led.*** There are many methods of training, but they all share certain foundational principles. Dog society is not a democracy. It's a hierarchy. Owners must rank higher in the pack than the dogs. Earlier (1950s) "dominance" models achieved this quite physically, which is to say that you can beat a dog into submission, but this does not earn you their respect, only their fear. Still, even today's popular lure/reward, non-violent methods, which are certainly more humane, call for us to enforce rules and limitations through calm, benevolent pack leadership.

In terms of Duffer, I do not think even a modified dominance model will prove successful because I believe it will reinforce his fears. We will need to use very gentle correction at appropriate times with precise timing, and consistent redirection through positive reinforcement. It will be a balancing act, because we want to earn his respect so that he happily does what we ask of him, while still teaching limitations and rules. Remember: anger and frustration are signs of weakness and instability.

- 2) ***Behaviors which are not reinforced will decrease in frequency.*** This is a basic, proven principle in operant conditioning. But, reinforcement is not always about reward. For instance, when Duffer is in the laundry room and you approach him making eye contact or talking to him, you are reinforcing his fears. Sometimes *ignoring* a behavior will decrease its frequency. For example, when a dog is begging for table scraps he should never, ever be acknowledged or given them. Once the dog realizes that the begging will not produce he will normally give up and go lay down. End result, when you sit down at the table to eat, the dog goes and lies down. Give in just once...and you've blown it, because then there *might be* a chance.

Our greatest challenge in Duffer's type of behavior modification is recognizing what we are and aren't supposed to reinforce and how.

- 3) ***For associative learning to occur with dogs, reinforcement or punishment (consequence) must happen within two seconds of the behavior.*** Some dog behaviorists even think it's *one second*. Keep this in mind always as we begin to apply reward and gentle correction to redirect and modify behavior, and remember that precise timing is absolutely critical.

In sum, I offer a few thoughts (only my opinions) on why Duffer might have developed these behaviors. We do not have solid, definitive evidence that he was abused prior to his being found, other than the obvious neglect with regards to his weight condition. However, many of his behaviors are common in dogs which were not properly socialized as a puppy and given proper temperament training. If I had to place my own bet on the roots of his problem behaviors (based on what I have studied to date) I would speculate that he was removed from his mother and litter mates too early which deprived him of the necessary lessons and social skills learned from both, and/or not properly socialized to people, places, animals, noises, etc, during critical periods such as: a) between 6 and 12 weeks, b) around 4 to 5 months when puppies often begin to shy away from strangers, and c) around 8 months when many previously well-socialized pups begin to get spooky around sudden movements, strange noises, strangers and children. **Socialization timetables, my paraphrasing from Dr. Ian Dunbar*

While it is true that dogs can be negatively affected by individual, traumatizing incidents, in my view far more dogs develop Duffer's kind of issues from improper and inadequate socialization and temperament training at an early age.

For Duffer, life is a harder climb than for most dogs. Life is stressful. His perception of life is stressful. What an awful way to have to live. Can we rehabilitate it? The answer is yes, to some extent anyway. The classic reality check is that certain fears or behaviors may never be able to be completely abated, although, we can sure give it our best shot. Success will depend heavily on the energy, attitude, consistency and commitment of his owners!

Issues And Strategies

Issue: *General lack of obedience training and structure*

Strategies: Starting with focus training using a "watch me" command, Duffer will benefit from the structure that comes with general obedience training. If a dog won't stop and pay attention to you, how will it know what you want it to do? This command is generally fast and easy and is the foundation of everything else to come. Eventually, "watch me" means to sit and look at you.

Get in the habit of only giving a command once. If the dog does not obey a command the second or third time you say it, what makes us think that it will do so on the tenth? If he doesn't acknowledge the command, walk away and come back in a minute. Use treats to gain his attention. Resist the temptation to have conversations with the dog. Stop talking. Dogs do not reason and therefore you cannot reason with the dog. You have many times heard Cesar emphasize calm energy. Talk with your body language and keep calm as you teach and enforce limitations.

Once you have "watch me" mastered, you begin to add other commands to it. Teaching down, leave it, take it, give it (or thank you) and other generally easy commands come easier once the dog can focus on you and with the use of food rewards. Commands like stay, come (a basic recall), and others require further techniques which we'll discuss at a later consultation.

Duffer should be brought to a sit using "watch me – sit" for everything. It's just polite dog manners, but think of it as the "power of sit". He should begin earning absolutely every treat and anything else he desires, including life rewards such as entering or exiting doors, an invitation to join you on the couch, whatever.

In Duffer's case, learning that making eye contact brings reward may help him eventually overcome the fear of direct eye contact even during episodes of escalated stress, although you should avoid making eye contact when he is in that state for now.

*For a message of disapproval, when appropriate, I snap my fingers, hold a forefinger finger in the air and usually either say "hey" or make a guttural noise.

Issue: *Greeting visitors / jumping up*

Strategies: Jumping up uninvited is rude behavior to us and must be remedied. The dog's objective is to gain attention. Any type of touch, contact (including eye contact) or attention is reinforcing the behavior. Guests must be informed to absolutely ignore the dog and turn their back on him when he is rude. Even if sitting down, when the dog jumps up, guests should immediately stand and turn their

backs. I strongly advise that a sign for guests be posted on the door that offers instruction on how to deal with the dogs. It should ask that they help you in training your dogs and simply explain the procedure. Tell them to ignore and make no eye contact.

(As an alternative or additional method: There will be times you will instinctively want to use an “off” command. If that works, great. If not, stop talking to him and use your body language. Block him by standing between the visitor and him and claiming the visitor. No talking. Stop talking.)

Here again, you can (and should) capture these moments to help with focus training, as it will be more of a challenge for the dog in the presence of a new visitor. Eventually, the dog should sit and focus until given permission to greet a visitor. Seems like a “yeah, right” moment here, but it can be done, even with Duffer.

Issue: Counter Surfing

Strategies: Until counter-conditioned (pun intended) Duffer should not be allowed unsupervised in the kitchen. Correction should be verbal and immediate. (You can use “off” if you like, but I like a guttural bark-like sound...such as “ahhhck.”) Move toward the dog calmly and apply a gentle two-finger touch to the neck or hind quarters if it can be applied immediately. Focus training, focus training, and more focus training. Redirect with “watch me” command. Wait two seconds, give an additional command such as “sit” and then reward.

Issue: Feeding time frenzy

Strategies: Logic would dictate that meals should not be prepared while the dogs stand in waiting, which escalates their level of excitement. Prepare meals when the dogs are crated, such as the night before. Secondly, I would suggest that the dogs not be fed at the same time, but rather in the order they rank in the hierarchy of the pack. In Duffer’s case, since we will be hand feeding him high value treats during training, his meals should be adjusted so as not to over feed.

In the interest of obedience training, it would be prudent to feed him as much of his meals by hand as possible for now, making him earn every bite. This does require extra time, possibly more than is possible to offer, but it is a valuable tool, especially since it teaches that all good things come from “mom and dad”, and...“who’s in charge of the food?”

Issue: Urinates in crate

Strategies: While I understand that Duffer requires potty breaks more often than most dogs, I can only think of three strategies here. One, decrease the amount of water he takes in, especially in the mornings. Two, crate him in a smaller crate (as the one he is in is probably too roomy). And three, hire someone to come in the mid-day to let him out, if possible and practical. A mid-day dog walk wouldn’t hurt him one bit either. I’m at a loss for any further advice on this one.

Issue: Space possessive / aggressive: laundry room

Strategies: This is the most troublesome of the behaviors. When Duffer retreats to the laundry room he begins to growl and bark and his anxiety level is so escalated that he can even hypersalivate and froth at the mouth, signs of severe stress. The owners have both tried coaxing him out with various approaches, but sometimes the episodes last for one, even two hours. In my opinion, the previous approaches have all reinforced his fears because direct eye contact and other contributing factors were used.

Field Notes: "When I entered the room to shoot video of the behavior, he was growling and barking. I made no eye contact and said nothing to him. I turned to the side and sat down on the floor and looked away. I exposed a handful of small pieces of hot dog which he quickly (but warily) came to and took and then retreated back to his spot a few feet away. I kept offering the treats and he kept taking them without any growling, so I softly said "good boy" when he took them. After a few times I put my hands gently under his chin, on his brisket, then all around his neck and under his collar, and finally on his withers. The instant Anna appeared in the doorway and looked in he began growling and barking.

When I got up and left the laundry room, he resumed his frantic growling and barking. He would walk to the door and peek out and then retreat back in and continue vocalizing. I knelt sideways just outside the door and put a treat on the floor and said "Duff". He came out and took it and then retreated back. I continued this, adding distance, until he would come out fifteen to twenty feet for the treat and then zoom back to his room. What a fun game! Although he showed signs of tension and stress, some trust was built. Eventually he turned the corner and went for a drink at which point I rose and gently walked over and shut the laundry room door. The entire episode lasted maybe fifteen minutes.

Later, I intentionally opened the door again and he went in and remained quiet. I went to the door and looked at him directly and he instantly began growling and barking at me. Oops. My mistake. Using a similar strategy as before, I managed to get him out of the room in just a few minutes, this time tossing the treats past me, which he happily went for and then I shut the door."

Still, this cannot be the sole strategy for abating this behavior. I'd like the room to be associated with positive stimuli and consequences. Time should be spent in the room with him, and often. I would suggest frequently making time to enter the room first and sit down with a magazine and a bag of treats. No eye contact, no talking except to say "good boy" when he calmly takes food from the hand. Just read, or pretend to read, and dole out the goodies, sometimes making him work for them by not letting the treat out of the hand right away. When he is calm and submissive, gently place your hands on him as described above, making sure to work your fingers in, around and under his collar.

To get him out of the room, you can play the fun game described above (if time allows), or as an alternative, put a long lead on him before you enter the room so that when you get up and exit, you can pick up the lead outside the room, appear in the doorway (no eye contact), turn your back and gently guide him out with the lead. No talking, no jerking, no yanking...just calmly bring him out. If he protests, pull gently with calm, even pressure. There will come a moment of surrender when he simply starts walking and walks past you. Once he is out, shut the door and say nothing. I emphasize...*keep it calm*. Your energy will be rewarded.

Finally, a short tip on the use of calming signals. Dogs speak their own language and are quite keen on sending calming, pacifying signals to one another, often to send the clear message, "Hey, no worries, I'm keeping it cool. Chill out, man." Included in these wonderful messages that you can use are:

- 1) *A look away...* In other words, no eye contact. Just like when you pull up to a stoplight and look at the attractive or disgusting person in the car next to you. When he or she turns and makes eye contact with you, you look away, don't you? It's your way of guaranteeing that he or she doesn't take you as threatening.
- 2) *Yawning...* the calming power of the yawn crosses species like magic. Pretend to yawn. Big yawns.
- 3) *Lip licking...* no, don't lick the dog's lips. Lick your own lips.

- 4) *Stretching out...* dogs that are comfortable with their mates and owners will often greet with a big stretch, front legs and paws extended, butt in the air, tail up. Sometimes it comes with a yawn or is followed by lying down like the Sphinx. This is thought of by some as a way your dog tells you he loves you, because dogs under stress or high anxiety will not engage in this behavior. The behavior requires trust and comfort. You can stretch out in this manner for your dog too, which tells him that you trust and are comfortable with him.
- 5) *Busy work...* sometimes dogs calm one another by simply sniffing around or lightly pawing at the ground. In other words, pay attention to something other than the dog, some little inconsequential thing. For instance, put two coins on the floor and just putz with them with your forefinger as you look at them. Whatever, be creative.

Issue: *Space possessive / aggressive (growls when on couch, etc.)*

Strategies: Redirection. Approach Duffer with high value treats. Watch me...treat. Stop talking. Use calming signals if necessary.

Issue: *Pulls hard on lead during walks*

Strategies: Principle - The dog wants to move forward. He needs to learn that pulling will result in him not moving forward. Walk Duffer solo for a while. Utilize the following "roundabout to the right" technique which I demonstrated quite successfully for Anna:

Palm up, the four fingers of the left hand go through the hand loop of the lead and then the lead is held at its half length point in the same hand. When the dog forges ahead you release the excess lead (while keeping a hold on the hand loop). You must anticipate the moment it comes taut. At that precise moment, the instant the dog physically feels he is pulling; you reverse direction and walk the other way, "reeling in the dog to your side" as you return the excess slack to the left hand. As the dog comes to your left side you roundabout to the right and are walking in the same direction you started with. Do not jerk, yank or use excess force. The entire move is done in one smooth motion. You must be consistent and do this every time you see the dog about to pull. Watch the lead. Stay calm. Do not talk. Stop talking. Do not have a conversation with the dog. Do not reinforce the behavior by being verbal. Change the pace of your walk often.

I wonder whether walks with the full pack at this point are causing him more stress than joy. In time, he can be reintroduced to pack walks. At that point both owners need to be involved, one to walk Greta and Austin while the other walks Duffer. Maybe someday, one handler and all three dogs will be able to be calmly in sync. Until then, I sincerely believe it's causing more stress to Duffer than not.

Issue: *Reactive to passing cars*

Strategies: Redirection. Whether Duffer's reactive behavior is linked to a past event or is a prey drive response, we need to convince him that cars mean reward. So, very high value treats need to be used. Watch me...treat. Watch me...treat. Watch me...hold treat in hand and make him work for it, only giving the treat after car has passed. BIG party! This will be much more difficult to rehab in the presence of the other dogs as one or both of them will try to intervene and restore balance when he is an escalated state.