

CAVALIER KING CHARLES SPANIAL POSSESSIVE AGGRESSION

This column is intended to be of practical information to Cavalier owners. It is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the field of Animal Behavior, nor to simply represent a small portion of the complete research that has been done in Behavioral Medicine. The focus of this column is for information and educational purposes only and to share this information with other owners of this beloved breed.

The Cavalier King Charles Spaniel is becoming more popular every year. With this popularity comes the problems of popularity...such as backyard breeders, pet mills and pet store puppies. We must all have a “heads up” as to some of these problems so that if we see these health and behavior issues crop up on our own lines, we will have the information and education as to how to deal with them. Also, with these issues, we can share information with pet people who may be dealing with some of these concerns.

One concern of mine is the increase in possessive aggression in the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. This aggression is so totally opposite the “correct temperament” of the cavalier, that it breaks my heart when I see it, and I pray that breeders, exhibitors, rescue organizations and pet owners address this problem aggressively and swiftly. Aggressions in our breed can be just as serious as MVD and other heart and health issues and we must keep temperament at the top of our own personal “code of ethics”.

POSSESSIVE AGGRESSION

SIGNALMENT: Cavaliers affected can be either male or female. 50% of cavaliers diagnosed with possessive aggression exhibited it by 7 to 12 months of age, and 25% exhibited it by the tender age of three months. The purebred dogs most affected by this form of aggression belong to the Toy and Terrier Groups. This form of aggression can be seen in mixed breeds and is troublesome in the other purebred groups as well. It is however, like fears, phobias and fear-aggression, “on the rise” in the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

DESCRIPTION: Cavaliers exhibiting possessive aggression do not relinquish toys or objects to their owners (or sometimes-even strangers). These objects may be “stolen” possessions of the owner. If the owner tries to take the object, the cavalier may growl, snarl, snap and/or bite.

CIRCUMSTANCES: Frequently these affected dogs “present” the object for play at the owner’s feet (or present the object to another dog in the household) and strike if the owner (or other known dog) reaches for the object. Cavaliers with possessive aggression can quickly “cycle” through behaviors associated with solicitation of attention and then respond to the attention with a challenge. They can also hoard or create a “stash” of stolen goodies, growling and protecting their “stash” from others (human and canine family members).

HISTORY: Dogs with protective aggression sometimes only exhibit this behavior to other dogs in the household, but not to human family members. Or it can be the other way around or a combination of both. Also included in this type of aggression can be “food aggression”, but since food-related aggression is probably tightly coupled to canine evolutionary history, it is not surprising that it is often difficult to treat. Protecting food may be an ancestral adaptive behavior. In staged contests, you can observe puppies forming “hierarchical rankings” on the basis of possession of a bone or toy. This is NORMAL behavior. True protective aggression is NOT NORMAL behavior for a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel and must not be tolerated. I also can not state that I personally have seen this “run in family lines” and whether or not this is “inherited” is to date, unknown. For breeders, I think prudence is needed and research of the particular dog should be done to establish whether this is a single aggression or if there are other offshoots of other aggressions (such as fear) involved. I would not breed any cavalier that maintains this form of aggression in combination with other behavioral problems.

PROGNOSIS FOR TREATMENT:

FAIR TO EXCELLENT (depending on owner participation in behavior program)

TREATMENT: First, before beginning to treat your dog for this problem, remove ALL DESIRED OBJECTS from your dog(s) and access to them, for now. The treatment for possessive and food aggression involves teaching the cavalier to relinquish ANY object to its person ON REQUEST. If you can not teach the dog to willingly relinquish one class of objects – and this may happen if those objects are “bones” – it would be far preferable to omit these from the dog’s repertoire forever. Remember, the goals of this program are twofold: by decreasing the dog’s anxiety if it is inappropriately protecting an object, it is hoped that the dog will learn to relax and be less anxious when presented with the object, and finally, minimization of any danger to any person or other dog(s) who may come in contact with the dog when it is protecting the object, regardless of whether the person thinks that such protection is rational. When all dogs learn to behave appropriately, they become safer. The treatment involving possessive and food aggression (which is a very brief version of the entire program) is listed below.

SUMMARY: Every time a Cavalier is allowed to experience a possessive event it is having its possessive aggression reinforced. These possessive episodes must be stopped immediately. The dog must first learn to relax and not be anxious. Distressed cavaliers cannot “learn” or “focus”. Remember for the program to work, it is not sufficient that the dog is just sitting or staying. The cavalier must be RELAXED. If your dog has a problem or difficulty with any portion of the program, divide them into smaller units and continue. If your dog works best for three 5-minute periods instead of one 15-minute period, do the former first and work up to the latter. You again, the owner, ARE ALWAYS THE BEST TEACHER for your own dog.

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION PROGRAM IN BRIEF: Keep in mind that the foundation for ALL clinical behavior programs is teaching the dog to defer to you, its master, for everything. Teach your dog to do a task, such as sit (or stand pretty if being shown) for every food treat, going out, and getting anything special. Make sure your dog knows you are the “boss”. Then, once you feel your dog is deferring to you for everything it receives or does, teach your dog to relax. Use a “cue word or phrase” such as “good relax” while you massage your dog. Make sure your other dogs are not around while spending this one-on-one time with this particular possessive-aggressive dog. Use plenty of treats (a tiny small-half fingernail-size-portion) during this program and treats that are high in protein such as a tidbit of cheese or meat may help induce changes in brain chemistry that help the dog to relax. Also use much praise as a treat. Make sure you have your dog’s attention. Treat or praise for receiving your dog’s undivided attention. So therefore... 1) you have taught your dog to defer to you for everything it does or receives from you, and...2) you have taught your dog to relax. Now, select an object in which your cavalier has NO INTEREST – a paperweight or a rock from outdoors. The object should have absolutely NO VALUE to your cavalier and certainly should not frighten your dog. Ask your dog to sit and stay, or lie down and stay, and relax (using your relaxation cue word) and place the object about 2-3 meters from the dog, so that your dog can see it. Reward the dog with a food treat or praise for being relaxed. Instruct your dog to “stay”; then quickly pick up and return the object. Return to the dog and reward the dog if it relaxed and did not move. Continue to pick up and replace the object, moving it progressively closer to the dog in a gradual manner. Each time you pick up and replace the object, remember to return to the dog and reward your cavalier if it ignored the movement of the object and relaxed. If at any point the dog picks up the object, ask the dog to drop it. This is a command that ALL PUPPIES SHOULD LEARN, and you can use this program to teach it, if they already do not know how. If the dog drops the object, tell the dog that it was good, but do not reward it with a food treat. After this, ask the dog to wait or stay for 5 to 10 seconds. If it does so, reward the dog with a food treat. If the dog does not drop the object after a second request, you can either isolate the dog or leave the room.

If you leave the room you have denied the dog both your attention and control of the situation. The dog will ultimately seek you out, When it does, ask the dog to sit, request that it wait, and begin some relaxation exercises or massage. Then begin again with the program above.

After your cavalier is able to sit quietly and relax, even if the object is removed from directly in front of it, select a different item with which to work with the dog. The next object should be one about which your dog may care slightly more for. Repeat the entire procedure as listed above and very slowly and over the course of many days, select items that are progressively more interesting to your cavalier.

Finally, if your dog is able to complete the entire program and appear relaxed and happy when you pick up even the most valued of its items or things, you may wish to start “take it – drop it”. This is another exercise that all puppies should learn. Start with objects in which the dogs have a mild interest (a broken squeak toy) and proceed to object in which the dog has a keen interest (a rope or plush dog toy). Consider using rawhide or real bones IF AND ONLY IF your dog is not aggressive around food. It is ideal to start puppies by teaching them to relinquish rawhides or bones, but if you begin to have problems with aggression, talk to your veterinarian. It is always safer to deny rawhides and real bones to dogs that have the potential for problem behavior. The dogs will not be deprived if you do so. And keep the program going with a positive attitude. Dogs that can learn to enjoy the exercises will progress at the fastest rate.

DOG’S TASK:

The dog should sit, stay and relax when:

The object is placed on the floor 3 meters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 2.5 meters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 2 meters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 1.5 meters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 1 meters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 0.5 meters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 0.25 meters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 10 centimeters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 5 centimeters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor 2 centimeters away from the dog, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

The object is placed on the floor, touching the dog’s feet, briefly retrieve and replace the object.

FOR FUTURE REPETITIONS:

- Repeat all tasks in different locations
- Repeat all tasks with all family members
- Repeat all tasks with only every second or third task being rewarded with a treat. (Remember Praise!)
- Repeat with only intermittent treat reinforcement. (Remember Praise!)
- Put the object directly under the dog’s nose or gently in its mouth and say, “Take it”; before the object can be fully grasped say “good girl/boy!” and then say “Drop it”; reward the dog for allowing you to take the object, although the dog never truly held it. Gradually advance to letting the dog hold the object for, at first, a very short time. Reward the dog with praise or a tiny bit of treat when it responds to “drop it”. Slowly increase the amount of time that the dog can have the object before you request that the dog drop it. Maintain full control over the dog during this period of training.

ADVANCED TASKS (And super for all puppies!):

Have the dog sit and relax while you hold out an object in which the dog is interested in and do the following:

Put the object in the dog’s mouth or, if the dog will take the object itself, offer it with the request to

take it and let the dog hold it for 1 second, then repeat again for a 1-second hold time. Request to “drop it” and reward/praise.

Repeat 10 repetitions increasing the dog holding for 2 seconds and repeat for 2, 3 seconds and repeat for 3, 4 seconds and repeat for 4 and then 5 seconds, and repeat for 5, requesting to “drop it” and then immediately reward/praise.

Repeat the previous exercises with progressively more fascinating (for the dog) objects. Ultimately, you should be able to request that the dog take and drop virtually ANYTHING.

If your cavalier is only being possessive aggressive with another dog or other dogs in the household, complete the above program while not allowing any of your dogs to have special chew toys or “things” to be possessive of...and if a spat does occur with something missed or “stolen”, use the command “drop it” as soon as you witness the procedure beginning between your dogs. If the problem dog does not “drop it”, immediately go back and begin at the beginning. Increase the repetitions and be very dramatic about the praise and make sure the treats are very small but very special. You will introduce special chew toys or “things” slowly after success with the problem individual back into your household, as you maintain full control over all of your dogs reactions.

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