



A case of fear of unfamiliar people in a mixed-breed dog

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Abstract: Moka is a two-year-old, intact mixed-breed dog adopted from a kennel at six months old. A behavioral assessment was requested due to aggressive behavior when strangers arrive at the house. During her time at the kennel, Moka lacked proper socialization with visual, auditory, and social stimuli typical of family life. This deficiency hindered the development of essential skills needed to cope with everyday life after adoption. The proposed treatment focuses on establishing a stable and secure relationship between Moka and her owners, combined with behavioral modification techniques such as desensitization and counterconditioning towards strangers. Pharmacological therapy is considered only after assessing her initial response to behavioral therapy. Additionally, the use of DAP Collar, L-Theanine (Anxitane®), and L-Tryptophan supplementation has been suggested to support the process. Moka's case highlights the importance of providing adequate social and environmental stimulation to dogs housed in kennels to enhance their well-being and prevent emotional and behavioral issues that could lead to their return to the kennel or the development of severe conditions like phobias.

Key Words: dog, fear, aggressivity.

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Signaling

Moka is a two-year-old, intact female mixed-breed dog, weighing approximately fifteen kilograms.

Reason for visit

Aggressive behavior (defensive aggression) towards unfamiliar people who visit the house.

History

Moka was adopted from the shelter by her current owners when she was six months old. During her stay in the shelter, Moka did not become accustomed to the stimuli she would encounter once adopted: household noises (appliances, doorbells, etc.), city traffic noises and elements, unfamiliar people. Upon arriving home, Moka had great difficulty establishing a relationship with the owners, particularly with the owner's husband. It took her a few weeks to learn to trust him, so much so that she initially kept a close eye on his every movement.

Typical Day: most of the day (from morning until 5 p.m.), Moka is alone. Upon the owner's return, she is taken for a walk lasting about half an hour to 45 minutes. Evenings are spent at home with the owners; Moka spends the night in the courtyard.

Activities: playing with a ball (fetch), scent games (searching for a hidden treat inside a rolled-up towel).

Feeding: One meal per day (kibble), given in the evening. Eating behavior is characterized by voracity, while daily water intake seems particularly concentrated at the end of the meal.

Clinical Condition: vaccination prophylaxis is up-to-date, as well as prevention against Heart-

worm Disease. It does not appear that prevention against Leishmaniasis has been implemented. Moka's clinical condition is good, and she has never had to undergo surgery.

Visit at home

Upon arrival at the residence, Moka immediately shows fear and distrust: she barks continuously and keeps her distance. She refuses the treat even when it is tossed from a distance. Showing no signs of relaxation or calm, it is decided to let her go outside to the courtyard, giving her the opportunity to observe the situation through the glass door. The situation does not change, so the external shutters are closed, depriving her of the ability to see the unfamiliar presence. At that point, she immediately stops barking. For the rest of the visit, there are no attempts to whine, bark, or howl. Only occasionally does Moka scratch at the door with her paws. Towards the end of the visit, the owner opens the door, allowing Moka to freely decide what to do. Slowly, Moka chooses to come inside; she no longer barks and, although still very cautious, approaches while maintaining a safe distance. Before concluding the visit, a treat is tossed: this time, Moka accepts it and moves away from the room to eat it.

Diagnosis

- Lack of a secure attachment bond: early separation from the mother can lead to difficulties in coping with new experiences. First of all, the maternal example is missing, which, through social learning, teaches the puppy the most appropriate behavioral patterns. Moreover, the puppy does not have enough time to establish a secure attachment bond with the mother. This type of attachment makes the puppy feel self-confident, trusting in itself, and feeling protected (Mariti 2020). If these sensations cannot be achieved due to the absence of the mother, the puppy will perceive the living environment only as a source of dangers, and the predominant emotion accompanying it will be fear.
- Understimulation During the Socialization Period: the critical socialization phase occurs between 3 and 12 weeks of age, a period vital for the dog's emotional, psychological, and behavioral development. During this time, puppies exhibit high curiosity and low fear levels, making them naturally inclined to explore new experiences and become familiar with novel stimuli in their environment (Wormald et al., 2016). As the puppy ages beyond this sensitive period, curiosity decreases while fear of unfamiliar elements increases, making the dog less willing to explore or confront unknown situations. In Moka's case, this critical period was spent in a shelter environment characterized by constant noise, lack of positive experiences, and minimal human contact.

This background explains why Moka's predominant response to unfamiliar people or contexts is fear.

Treatment

1. **Strengthening the Owner-Dog Relationship**: it is essential to consider the relationship between Moka and her owners. The ideal relationship is one that allows the development of a secure attachment bond, making Moka feel protected when she is with her owners. This feeling of safety can support Moka when faced with new or challenging situations. To achieve this, owners must acquire proper skills in understanding dog communication and communicating effectively with

Moka. Only when Moka receives attention and consistent responses will she view her owners as reliable figures she can trust and depend on.

2. Problem Management

At Home: before the arrival of guests, Moka should be placed outside in the courtyard, and the external shutters should be closed to prevent her from seeing inside. Providing Moka with a chew toy or a food-stuffed Kong during her time outside can help her stay calm. Periodically check to ensure Moka remains relaxed. Visitors should avoid using the doorbell to prevent alerting Moka. Instead, they should call upon arrival. Lowering the doorbell's volume is also advisable.

During Walks: minimize exposure to triggers by selecting less crowded areas and appropriate times of day (early morning and late evening). Pay attention to proper leash handling and redirect Moka's focus when strangers are approaching by changing the side of the street or walking away. Owners need to learn to identify early signs of discomfort in Moka and redirect her attention toward them when necessary.

3. Training and Preparation

Implement exercises aimed at promoting calmness and teaching Moka to focus on her owners (e.g., "Look at me" command, hand target training).

Incorporate obedience training to improve control, such as staying close while stationary, walking calmly on the leash, and reliable recall. Encourage mental stimulation activities to enhance cognitive flexibility, reduce impulsivity, and improve emotional control (e.g., sniffing games, scent trails).

Teach correct leash usage to prevent transmitting negative emotions from the owners (e.g., worry, anxiety) when encountering strangers.

4. Desensitization and Counterconditioning

Gradually expose Moka to unfamiliar people using a counterconditioning technique, where a positive stimulus (e.g., treats, clicker training, or moving away from the trigger) is paired with the presence of strangers. Once Moka's perception of strangers improves, introduce Differential Reinforcement of Incompatible behavior (DRI) to reinforce positive, calm behavior around strangers.

During training sessions, avoid unexpected encounters with strangers. If unavoidable, redirect Moka's attention, change direction, or cross the street as soon as possible.

5. Pharmacological Therapy (If Needed)

Based on the behavioral assessment, pharmacological treatment may be postponed for now. Moka appears capable of responding adequately to behavioral therapy. However, if the trainer or dog sitter reports difficulties in gaining Moka's attention or if her emotional state remains too heightened, pharmacological support can be considered.

Recommended Supports:

- DAP Collar: A synthetic pheromone collar replicating the calming effect of the natural pheromone produced by a mother dog's sebaceous glands. Its purpose is to soothe and reassure Moka.
- L-Theanine (Anxitane®): An amino acid that inhibits glutamate receptors (excitatory) and promotes GABAergic transmission (inhibitory), providing relaxing and anxiolytic effects. Recommended dosage: 5-10 mg/Kg orally, twice daily (BID).
- L-Tryptophan Supplementation: This amino acid, a precursor to serotonin, may help reduce impulsivity. Supplementation can be achieved through specialized feeds or capsule administration.

Conclusions

Dogs lacking the skills necessary to cope with new stimuli in their environment require owners who can build a strong, reliable relationship with their pet. Establishing a solid bond is essential for the dog to feel adequately supported and view its owners as trustworthy, dependable figures. Providing appropriate spaces and allowing the dog sufficient time to make decisions calmly and effectively can help them develop proper behavioral strategies. Moreover, dogs like Moka, who have spent their socialization period in under-stimulating environments such as shelters, require targeted socialization and rehabilitation programs to prevent behavioral issues from escalating and potentially developing into phobias (Gazzano & Ogi, 2020). Indeed, research has demonstrated that prolonged shelter stays often lead to the emergence of behavioral problems (Cozzi et al., 2006) and significantly decrease the likelihood of adoption (Iacopini & Gazzano, 2024).

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Un caso di paura verso persone sconosciute in un cane meticcio

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Sintesi

Moka è una cagna meticcica di due anni, non sterilizzata, adottata da un canile a sei mesi. È stata richiesta una valutazione comportamentale a causa di comportamenti aggressivi manifestati quando arrivano estranei in casa. Durante il suo soggiorno in canile, Moka non ha ricevuto un'adeguata socializzazione con stimoli visivi, uditivi e sociali tipici della vita familiare. Questa carenza ha ostacolato lo sviluppo delle competenze fondamentali necessarie per affrontare la vita quotidiana dopo l'adozione.

Il trattamento proposto si concentra sulla creazione di un rapporto stabile e sicuro tra Moka e i suoi proprietari, combinato con tecniche di modifica comportamentale come la desensibilizzazione e il controcondizionamento nei confronti degli estranei. La terapia farmacologica viene presa in considerazione solo dopo aver valutato la risposta iniziale alla terapia comportamentale.

Inoltre, è stato suggerito l'utilizzo di DAP Collar, L-Theanine (Anxitane) e supplementazione di L-Triptofano per supportare il processo.

Il caso di Moka evidenzia l'importanza di fornire un'adeguata stimolazione sociale e ambientale ai cani ospitati nei canili per migliorare il loro benessere e prevenire problemi emotivi e comportamentali che potrebbero portare al ritorno in canile o allo sviluppo di patologie gravi come le fobie.