

Aggressive behavior in a cocker spaniel

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Abstract: A fawn cocker spaniel, male, 2 years old, was subjected to behavioral counseling as he presented aggression towards owners and other dogs, especially male.

According to the French school, the symptoms presented by the subject can be traced back to a form of sociopathy with the presence of a strong disturbance of intra- and inter-specific communication.

Given the episodes of biting, therapy with Clomipramine (2 mg/kg/ q12h) for 5 months was established, in addition to 2 months necessary for weaning from the medication. The use of Dog Appeasing Pheromone, with collar worn for 6 months was prescribed.

The behavioral modification therapy initially focused on the proper management of resources by providing adequate information to owners about it.

Aggression is one of the most frequently reported behavioral problems referred to veterinary behaviorist and requires careful management for the serious physical and psychological consequences that may result in bites. If the first effort of the veterinarian should be to ensure the safety of people who are in contact with the dog, the protection of animal welfare is not less important. In fact, a dog presenting an aggressive behavior towards co-specifics or, especially, towards the owner, must receive careful clinical and behavioral assessment to identify the cause, accompanied by a thorough risk analysis.

An urgent action is therefore necessary to ensure the welfare and to prevent any worsening of symptoms resulting in exclusion from the family. In fact, an aggressive dog will often be confined in small spaces and can not share with the owner many opportunities for social life. Immediate action is also requested by the instrumentalisation of the aggressive behavior that is very frequent and dangerous.

Key Words: dog, aggression, clomipramine

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Presentation

A fawn cocker spaniel, male, 2 years old, was subjected to behavioral counseling as he presented aggression towards owners and other dogs, especially male.

History and presenting signs

The dog was adopted at one month of age from a private breeder. The animal lives in the apartment and is owned by a couple without children; both owners work and the dog spends long periods, alone, in the house. The animal is mainly managed by the male owner toward whom he shows a greater deference than the woman; the dog responds to the call, obeys commands and goes out for eliminations 3 times a day.

Initially, the dog had a peaceful relationship even with the woman but it was disrupted by the

increasingly frequent occurrence of aggressive behavior. The woman reports that the fear of a possible bite makes her unable to be affective towards the dog.

When there are guests, except for a few relatives of the owners, the dog is confined to a room, to prevent possible aggression. He is confined to the kitchen also when he is left alone at home, to limit destruction and urinary markings.

The owners report describes the dog's behavior towards them as "authoritarian and aggressive," characterized by frequent bites with a gradual onset of unpleasant behaviors: asking for food from the table, growling during the play, going up on beds and sofas, barking insistently at strangers at the door.

If the owner tries to pet the dog, the animal can show aggressive behavior; on the contrary the dog is quieter when he starts the interaction with the owner.

The dog is punished by the owner when he growls or shows aggressive behavior. The punishments are prolonged even if the animal emits signals related to avoidance, pacification and submission.

Food and water consumption are normal: the dog is fed twice a day with industrial food.

The exploratory and somesthetic behaviors are also normal.

Eliminations are normal, with the exception of those that the dog makes when left for a long time alone at home.

Regarding sexual behavior, the dog does not mount objects or people. Being the dog a fine specimen from a morphological point of view, he has been mated several times.

Sleeping behavior is normal.

The dog plays with the owner but he tends to get irritated, if the contact is too long, and to become aggressive. Social behavior is characterized by intraspecific aggression towards strange dogs, especially if male.

Physical and laboratory evaluation

The clinical examination did not reveal any kind of alteration. Laboratory tests performed to assess liver and kidney functionality were normal.

Diagnosis

According to the French school, the symptoms presented by the subject can be traced back to a form of sociopathy with the presence of a strong disturbance of intra and inter-specific communication.

The animal does not present all aspects of sociopathy as the owners requested a behavioral counseling at the early signs of aggression with bite. The symptoms worsened at puberty and further at social maturity. The management of the different resources has become more problematic because the punishments inflicted by the owners and the misinterpretation of submissive postures and communication signals of the dog. These facts may have created anxiety in the patient showing signs of aggression by irritation during any approach.

Treatment

Given the episodes of biting, therapy with Clomipramine (2 mg/kg q12h) for 5 months was established, in addition to 2 months necessary for weaning from the medication. The use of Dog Appeasing Pheromone, with collar worn for 6 months, was prescribed.

The behavioral modification therapy initially focused on the proper management of resources by providing adequate information to owners about it.

Canine ethology notions were also provided to the owners, especially with regard to communication and to the calming signals.

An extensive explanation of the negative factors arising from the punishments was given to the owner, advising against the use of them and recommending positive reinforcement.

The owners were taught how to teach the dog some simple training exercises (sit, down and stay) that are required to increase the animal's initiative control, especially in particular circumstances such as the entry of people in the house.

A desensitization and counter conditioning program was also set to reduce aggressive behavior towards family people and strangers alike.

The play of the owners with the dog was changed, suggesting the practice of obedience and olfactory research exercises.

More frequent walks in a quiet place and little frequented by other dogs were also recommended. The dog proved a great learning ability and a high propensity to collaborate.

Follow-up

In the five months in which the dog was under drug therapy, two follow-ups were made: the first after 2 months and the second at the fifth month, when it was decided, in view of the improvement of the dog, to start the drug weaning. In both cases, the owners said they had noticed significant improvements in dog behavior and they were reluctant to interrupt drug therapy, fearing a recurrence of symptoms.

A third follow-up was carried out six months after the first visit, in the period of weaning and the owners did not report any particular event.

A fourth follow-up was carried out five months after drug interruption. The owners reported two more episodes of aggression but of reduced and no bites entities. The dog, in fact, continues to be aggressive towards male dogs and to manifest some aggressive behaviors against unknown persons who visit the house but, given the considerable improvement, the owners expressed a high level of satisfaction.

Discussion

Aggression is one of the behavioral problems more often referred to veterinary behaviorist and requires careful management for the serious physical and psychological consequences that may result in bites. If the first effort of the veterinarian should be to ensure the safety of people who are in contact with the dog, the protection of animal welfare is not less important. In fact, a dog presenting an aggressive behavior towards co-specifics or, especially, towards the owner, must receive careful clinical and behavioral assessment to identify the cause, accompanied by a scrupulous risk analysis.

Aggression manifestation in an animal as the dog, able to develop a strong attachment bond with the person (Mariti et al, 2013a and b), in fact reveals an alteration of social behavior that often can cause a state of anxiety or fear. Urgent action is therefore necessary to ensure the welfare and to prevent any worsening of symptoms resulting in exclusion from the family. In fact, an aggressive dog will often be confined in small spaces and can not share with the owner many opportunities for social life (Pageat, 1999).

Immediate action is also requested by the instrumentalisation of the aggressive behavior (Mege, 2006). The instrumentalisation process is defined as a modification of the phases that characterize

normal behavioral sequence (appetitive, consummatory and refractory phases). This process, though generalizable to all behavioral manifestations and sometimes deliberately induced by man, is quickly established in aggressive behavior. An instrumentalised behavior is a simplified and automated response: the dog, for example, bites (consummatory phase) without warning signals (appetitive phase).

Underlying the process of instrumentalisation there is an operant conditioning learning that a particular behavior produces a positive result for the animal. In the aggressive behavior, refractory phase disappears first and then the behavior is simplified with the disappearance of the appetitive one.

Positive punishments can induce rapid instrumentalisation of aggressive behavior, as occurred in the present case report, as they can arouse a state of fear from which the animal learns to escape with aggression.

Erroneous and inconsistent management of resources, that prevents the animal to learn the behavior necessary to obtain them, often causes the use of positive punishment. The unpredictability by the dog of the owner's behavior causes attempts, unsuccessful and subject to punishment, to get the resources.

The owner often does not know the canine ethology bases and ignores the existence of calming signals that the dog emits especially when in a stressful situation. The owner then, failing to recognize the calming signals emitted by the animal prior to the assault, punishes him with extended punishments, interrupted only when the dog reacts with aggressive behavior. It is then that the instrumentalisation starts to occur: the aggressive behavior is, in fact, reinforced because, with it, the dog gets the desired result, namely the interruption of punishment.

Acquired this learning, the selection by the dog of the most effective aggression behavioral patterns, can be very rapid, motivated by fear and anxiety in the relationship with the owner.

A reconfiguration of the dog-owner relationship, with a proper resource management, helps to make the animal's daily routine predictable, reducing the anxiety that can result from this uncertainty. Moreover, in this way the owner provides the animal with a number of alternative behaviors that may be successfully used to obtain the desired resources, preventing aggression.

In these cases, to restore the correct behavioral sequence, to reduce the impulsivity and, consequently, prevent further bites, it is often necessary to use a specific drug therapy. In addition to the positive effect on the dog, the prescription of a psychotropic drug often increases compliance of the owners who are so motivated to collaborate.

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Sintesi

Un cocker spaniel fulvo, maschio di 2 anni di età, è stato condotto alla consulenza comportamentale per episodi di aggressività nei confronti dei proprietari e di altri cani, soprattutto di sesso maschile

Secondo la scuola francese, i sintomi presentati dal soggetto possono essere ricondotti ad una forma di sociopatia con la presenza di un forte disturbo della comunicazione intra ed inter specifica.

Considerati gli episodi aggressivi, è stata istituita una terapia con Clomipramina (2mg/kg/die) per 5 mesi, oltre a 2 mesi necessari per lo svezzamento del farmaco. È stato inoltre prescritto il DAP collare per 6 mesi.

La terapia di modificazione comportamentale inizialmente fu mirata a fornire adeguate informazioni ai proprietari relativamente ad una corretta gestione delle risorse.

L'aggressività è uno dei problemi comportamentali più frequentemente riferiti al veterinario esperto in comportamento e richiede una attenta gestione per le serie conseguenze fisiche e psicologiche che possono derivare da una morsicatura.

Se il primo pensiero del veterinario deve essere quello di salvaguardare la sicurezza delle persone che sono in contatto con il cane, non meno importante è la tutela del benessere animale.

Infatti, un cane che presenti un comportamento aggressivo verso co-specifici o, specialmente, verso il proprietario, deve essere sottoposto ad un'attenta valutazione clinica e comportamentale per identificarne le cause, insieme ad una analisi del rischio.

Un intervento urgente è quindi necessario per tutelare il benessere e prevenire ogni peggioramento dei sintomi che possono risultare in un'esclusione dalla famiglia.

Infatti, un cane aggressivo sarà spesso confinato in spazi ristretti e non potrà condividere con il proprietario molte delle occasioni di vita sociale. Un intervento immediato, inoltre, è reso necessario anche dal processo di strumentalizzazione del comportamento aggressivo, evento molto frequente e pericoloso.

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