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CONFIDENCE

Some dogs are born with confidence. They accept new surroundings, people, and situations with aplomb and react, if not positively to change, at least without anxiety. Unfortunately, bold and fearless do not describe most Akitas. As puppies, they are very careful and quite cautious. Few I've seen are ever reckless. Akitas generally look before they leap.

I think of this breed as being born forty and then getting older. Except when hunting or fighting where they become relentless and totally focused on their task, they are rarely risk-takers. They seem stodgy and resistant to change, a tendency that can cement itself in the older dog. Anything that tells them their caution is justified reinforces the reaction. Consequently, unsocialized, unexposed dogs frequently are anxious when put in unfamiliar circumstances. The dog's anxiety level is proportionate to the number of strange things in the environment and their magnitude. In the worst case, the dog may have a panic attack.

Building confidence is very important to those of use who are showing and should be important to pet owners as well. A self-assured dog can go to the veterinarian, stay at the boarding kennel, accompany the family on a campout and even pack some of their equipment, go to dog shows, and compete in obedience trials. His poise in the face of new situations is based in part on inherited traits and in part on the ability to handle stress.

Managing Stress

Puppies encounter stress and learn to deal with it from the moment they are born. To enhance this ability, puppies must encounter manageable stress and must deal with it on their own. From the outset, you should pick up each puppy and handle it. At first, this will be when you weigh them after birth. In addition to putting them on the scale, you should hold the puppy, stroke it, and talk to it. They cannot hear you, but they can feel the vibrations from your speech. Individual handling should increase in amount and duration as the puppy grows. Walk about the house with it. Different rooms have different smells, temperatures, and sounds.

This should continue when the puppies' eyes and ears are open. Individually, each can be put on the floor and allowed to walk about and explore outside the litter box and without the security of mom and siblings. You will have to monitor the puppy's reactions. He can easily get into trouble. He can be mildly fearful but should be able to allay those fears in a short time. Any stressful situation he

encounters should be mild enough for him to overcome.

In so doing, the dog is learning not only to handle the particular situation he encounters, he is learning to learn. That is, he is developing a set of mental tools that allow him to evaluate and react suitably to new situations. The more successful he is at this, the more confident he will become.

To help this process along, the puppy needs to gain experience. He must be taken out into a world larger than his whelping box. As he grows, this world should expand from the back yard to the front, then to the neighborhood, then to training classes, shows, and other areas where large numbers of dogs and/or people gather. Here, he will learn to take cues from you and other humans and dogs.

The world is full of many things frightening to youngsters who lack the experience to evaluate whether something strange presents a real threat. To determine whether fear and perhaps flight are justified, the youngster will look to his mother, his siblings, and to you.

Discouraging Fear Responses

So, what do you do when the dog gets into trouble? It can happen anywhere. I've had puppies and young dogs go bananas over a mailbox or garbage sack. One of the worst panic attacks I've ever had was when one of my Shepherds encountered a bronze statue in a neighbor's front yard. She walked up and sniffed it, then freaked out.

Back to my veterinarian's advice, abject terror can only last for so long. An animal has only so much adrenaline, and as the supply decreases, the panic does too. Until this happens, reason is not the animal's strong point, but once adrenaline is depleted, the animal calms considerably. Your best course is to do nothing until the dog's flight response begins to shut down. You can talk to the dog, but make sure you are not sympathetic. The tone to strike is as if someone has told you a mildly amusing joke. If someone else is with you, you can both talk in a normal tone until the dog calms down.

Throughout, keep the dog as close to the problem as possible. In severe panic attacks, you may have to back off, then reproach. Tell the dog in a no-nonsense voice, "This is nothing to be afraid of. Look," then touch the object yourself or walk up to it. Let the dog see you're not afraid. Eventually, the dog will approach it. Then you can praise him and tell him he's very brave. As young dogs and puppies deal successfully with fears, they will become generally less fearful. Each time they conquer a problem, they gain confidence in their abilities and in you.

Obedience Training

Very few Akitas are actually "spooky." Instead, they are cautious and careful. When these characteristics are coupled with a lack of confidence, the dog can become very unhappy when he is in a strange situation. For these dogs, obedience training is a godsend. Confident dogs can reach into their bag of tricks and find a way to deal with the unusual. The structure provided by obedience training gives the less confident dog a prescribed method for handling stressful situations. As he does so, his confidence in his abilities increases, and he becomes less anxious.