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TOLERANT OF STRANGERS

If an Akita bites, its next most likely target after a child is a visitor to the house. He may even be someone who has come to your home frequently. To lessen this possibility, a valuable part of the dog's temperament is the ability to accept the presence of a non-threatening stranger whether he is neutral or friendly.

Ian Dunbar makes a particularly cogent observation about Oriental breeds, especially Japanese ones. He says the most stable dogs can be unreliable around strangers because the culture in which they were bred far longer than they have been here does not select for that trait.

When asked why, he pointed out that privacy there is at a premium and most homes are small by our standards. So, in Oriental countries little if any entertaining is done at a person's home. Instead, social activities occur at communal baths, restaurants, hotels, clubs, parks, etc. Only intimate friends and family are invited home.

As a result, dogs that do not like strangers may never be weeded out of the gene pool. Further, in guard-type breeds, distrust may be encouraged, since any stranger at the house would be a subject for alarm. Just as the herding instinct may or may not be present in city dogs, Oriental dogs such as the Akita may have a profound distrust and dislike of strangers that is never identified because it is never tested.

Changing Temperament

With Akitas, this tendency to be wary of strangers is something that needs to be selected away from in breeding and trained away from throughout the dog's life. Unfortunately, if you don't realize it exists, it's hard to do either. And, yes, doing so will change the character of the breed from its original state. I think it's ironic that those who quibble the most about attempts to make the breed's temperament more socially acceptable see nothing wrong with the drastic changes in structure and type accomplished over the last two decades.

Acceptable Behavior

Please don't think I'm advocating a temperament incompatible with the character of the breed. We are not raising Poodles or Golden Retrievers, and if we wanted that type of dog, we certainly wouldn't be in Akitas! However, when a visitor comes to your house, gets in your car, come up to you when you're in your

yard, or is talking to you at a dog show, your Akita at least should be neutral. He should show no sign of anxiety or hostility toward this person. He should be tolerant of the stranger's presence.

Many Akitas totally ignore strangers, and that is a perfectly acceptable response. If the person is particularly "doggy-acceptable," you may find your dog making a few overtures, especially if you're at a show and the stranger has ever had liver in his pocket. This breed, though, likes to make the first move, and you may find the friendliest dogs seem uncomfortable with someone who forces attention on them. That is not a cause for hostility, however, and your dog should accept this attention even if it is not with enthusiasm.

This reserved demeanor is part of the breed's innate dignity. I'm still waiting for a few of my bitches to develop this! At ten, Mikki remains a terrible clown who will do absolutely anything for a cookie. You may find you have a few of these, too, and their temperament is just as much an Akita's as her cousin's. He gazes off into the distance when strangers pet him as if no one is there. If they disappeared into a poof of smoke, he wouldn't notice or care about their absence. He really only cares about his family and a few of our friends, but he tolerates strangers.

Problem Areas

You may see problems with your dogs or puppies you place depending on how they are raised and trained. Certainly, the worst-case scenario is a dog that is left outside all the time in a house with little social activity and that is rarely taken anywhere else. These dogs can be time bombs. The best way to avoid tragedies is to make sure you sell puppies only to homes where they will be kept inside.

I also require contractually that puppies be taken to [training classes](#) . To encourage this, I help buyers locate classes and provide information about them and rebate \$50 when they bring me a certificate that says they graduated from a class. First this gives the owners some handle on the dog when he is still at a size that is easy to work with. Secondly, the dog gets exposure early on to strangers who are friendly and to other dogs. If at all possible, I strongly recommend classes that use clicker training and if they are not available, classes that use positive training methods (usually food).

Strange Children

Another inclination that is not uncommon in Akitas is a distrust and even dislike of non-family children. The most distressing thing about these dogs is that frequently they are devoted family pets who adore their own children and will tolerate anything from them. They may be tolerant or even friendly to adult strangers, but visiting children are at risk.

Until he does something overt, identifying these dogs may be difficult for inexperienced owners since the beginning signs of hostility are often very subtle. Even more unfortunate, because the dog is so good with his own children, the owners tend to justify the first obvious signs of trouble by blaming the child or extraneous circumstances.

Therefore, when I sell puppies I tell buyers in written material and reinforce it verbally that no children, especially toddlers, should ever be left unsupervised with any dog. To do so is to bet with a child's life as the stake. Even the most stable dogs can put two and two together and get five. What happens, I ask them, when your son's best friend picks up a toy and bashes your son in the head with it. Don't you think your dog will see this is an attack on his child? What do you think he's going to do?

A dog that does not like strange children might not need even this much provocation. My first encounter with this is an excellent example. Since it happened, I've heard the same song, different verse, more times than I can count which is what leads me to believe this is an inherited component of temperament.

This family had two dog-loving boys and an indoor-outdoor Akita they had had from puppyhood. The mother was firm but non-assertive and had had dogs all her life. They did not go to a training class. The dog was wonderful with her children. When he was almost a year old, she called me and told me he was growling at one of her younger son's friends. I asked her if he bothered any other children, and she said, "No, only this boy. He is partially deaf and speaks differently from the other children." Of course, it wasn't the dog!

I told her the dog's behavior posed a significant risk to this child. I asked her to return the dog to me, offering her a replacement from an upcoming litter. She refused because they all loved the dog. He was crate-trained, and at my urging, she agreed to keep the dog crated whenever visiting children were over at the house. I made several follow-up calls about the dog, still asking them to return him, getting a refusal and an assurance that the dog was crated.

Well, children just aren't always able to remember what is vitally important to adults. One day, her son took his friend out in the back yard without telling the mother and without putting up the dog. The visitor bent over to pick up a toy on the patio. Unfortunately, it was next to the dog's food bowl. He attacked. Hearing the screams, the mother rushed out and yelled at the dog, who immediately let go.

Because the dog attacked the back of the child's skull rather than his face and let go when commanded, the physical damage required only stitches in the emergency room. The scars are hidden by the child's hair. He is now terrified of all dogs. The mother, who is not afraid of Akitas herself, becomes almost phobic when children are around them. She told me she is sure the child would be dead if she had not been right in the next room.

They still refused to have the dog euthanized. Instead, they placed it with an out-of-town friend. I talked to this man several times and finally agreed that the dog had a chance with him. Despite my misgivings, the placement has worked out well. At ten years of age, the dog is now nearing the end of his life.

Dealing With Problems

I don't know what I could have done differently once the dog was out of my hands. My mistake was in selling a male to this family in the first place, and I no longer sell them to people who have not had at least Northern dogs before unless they come over and just bowl me over with family assertiveness. The incident sent

me to several seminars on aggression and to a number of books.

Now I would insist that the dog go to a training class, and that the less-assertive mother be the one to train him. Instead of relying on isolation to protect visitors from the dog, which is doomed to failure in the most compulsive of homes, I should have encouraged a course of desensitization and probably some sort of behavior consultation with a trainer. Intervention with a young dog that has not become so distressed that he attacks might have changed the course of events.

Dogs have a threshold of tolerance. Its height is determined first by their inherited temperament, which differs among breeds and within a breed among its individuals, and secondly by their degree of socialization to strangers in and out of the home. Not only does the dog need to get out and see people, people need to come to the dog's house and see him.

Of course, you normally don't invite people over for your dog's benefit, but if you own an Akita you should make a point of it. Your dog may be less than enthusiastic about visitors. Don't worry unless he shows signs, even subtle ones, of hostility. This may include: looking the visitor in the eye; sitting or standing (worse) between the two of you; anxious looks at the visitor accompanied by whines; and/or pacing.

I even have a few that make monkey-like noises and blow through their lips like horses. This is their equivalent to a growl and is a warning to me that they are very suspicious and distrustful of the stranger. Of course, sometimes these actions are justified, and I am not in any way suggesting that you should not heed the warnings of a guard dog doing his job.

If the visitor on the porch is pitching magazines and you've never laid eyes on him before, you'd be smart to shut the door and keep your dog around. On the other hand, if it's your next-door neighbor or a friend from work--someone you know, someone who is safe in your judgment--your dog is out of line.

Desensitization

Adults: A dog that is obviously hostile should be leashed and put on a down stay next to you. If he is so suspicious you cannot get him into a down, then put him in a sit stay. If he breaks the stay, correct him and put him back in it. Otherwise, ignore him and continue your conversation with your friend. Both reinforce your own dominance, although the sit less so, and will eventually show him your friend is no threat. Giving him no attention keeps you from inadvertently reinforcing one of his hostile responses. Just like children, dogs can and will do things for your attention even if the attention they receive is negative.

Never try to reassure a fearful or distrustful dog by petting him and telling him, "It's okay." First, it's not okay and secondly, you're not allaying his anxiety, you're rewarding it and, thus, encouraging it

My veterinarian gave me a great piece of advice about dealing with anxious, fearful, or angry dogs. Physiologically, the dog's activated state is maintained by the release of adrenaline. Since the adrenals can produce only so much of it, eventually,

the dog's hyper-attentive state will wear off. The more agitated the dog is, the more quickly this will happen; the calmer, the less so.

While you and your visitor are talking, observe your dog's behavior. He will eventually have to relax, which will be evident from his posture and demeanor. When you see this, you can acknowledge his good behavior with some attention and a treat, so long as he remains on the down or sit-stay. If he gets so bored he goes to sleep-great, you've made a giant step forward!

Take all this in small steps and realize you may have some set-backs. When your dog is comfortable with visitors that sit and talk, have them stand up and walk about. Reinforce the dog's down-stay and ignore any signs of suspicion or wariness on the dog's part. Eventually, the visitors can give him treats for good behavior. Perhaps you can teach him to shake hands for a treat to break the ice. All sorts of techniques can defuse the dog's suspicions.

Children: If your problem is with children, you will have to stand or sit with the dog while your child and a visitor play quietly. Over time, the dog will become more comfortable in the children's presence. Then, their play can become more active. The trick here, as with adults, is to let the dog get control of himself, learn that the situation is not dangerous, and develop appropriate responses that get everyone's approval.

Desensitization should be reinforced repeatedly and done with many different children. The dog should still not be left alone with them, but if someone forgets, which will inevitably happen, the children and the dog won't have to pay for the oversight.

In summary: If you have a dog that has a behavior problem, you not only have to correct the problem, you have to give him a socially acceptable alternative to that behavior. He doesn't like children, he has to learn to leave them alone; he doesn't like visitors in the house; he has to learn to accept them.

You have to learn how to recognize the initial indicators of problems and instead of making excuses for them, you've got to move quickly to stop them. You have to lead your dog on a path that makes him an acceptable companion and pet.

Breeders must learn not to accept the owner's comments at face value. Ask specific questions about the dog and his behavior so that you can identify any problems that might be developing. You'll have to listen carefully to the replies and be ready to offer constructive advice about handling problems

Breeding

When the dog in question is a breeding prospect, you will have to evaluate the strength of the problem and try to identify its source. In the above case, we looked at the behavior of our dogs and decided the problem lay with a common ancestor. Almost all the males and some of the bitches with her behind them had some oddity of behavior, although it was by no means the same from dog to dog.

Two dogs, for instance, disliked anything with wheels. No, they had not been run over as puppies. In fact, they had only the one bitch in common in their pedigrees; they just had the same phobia. Some males didn't like children; others didn't like strange adults. We ultimately abandoned this line completely in favor of ones that

produced more stable temperament.

In fairness, this action wasn't all that difficult since none of these dogs were big winners, and in accordance with Murphy's law, the very best ones in terms of conformation had some of the weirdest behaviors. Breeding is after all a balancing act, so had we been unable or unwilling to sacrifice breeding these dogs, we would have looked at lines very strong in temperament and bred to something line- or inbred on it. Then, to continue, we would have used only the dogs that showed improved temperaments.