

Border Collies and herding breeds

Why are some Collies and other herding breeds sometimes aloof, stubborn and even aggressive? The easiest answer I can give is purely and simply, 'culture shock'.

Collies are not genetically programmed to be pets. They are genetically programmed to be sheepdogs; to work livestock, to think and act like sheepdogs and to live a typical sheepdog's life.

Once you accept this simple reality, the 'barrier', or more frustrating, aspects of Collie behaviour will start to make more sense.

Similarly, a greater understanding of the essential roots, instincts and nature of the sheepdog is the key to managing and training these bright and incredibly special breeds.

Although many owners do not realize it, the most common problems experienced in pet Collies arise from some basic element of sheepdog instinct, or character that has not been sufficiently understood by owners.

If I list these problems now then a few Collie-owners might hear some rather loud bells ringing:

Chasing and herding inappropriate things such as bikes, cars, children.

Nipping/snapping at other people/dogs.

Manic or excessively boisterous/excitable behaviour.

Constantly barking/whining/demanding attention from owners.

Aggression towards an owner or other household member.

Being exceptionally fearful/nervous in nature.

Being unresponsive in training or appearing totally deaf to an owner's commands.

But first I'm going to explain what it is about Collies that triggers such behaviour, and then I'm going to look at the best ways of dealing with it, beginning with the classic sheepdog chase and herd instinct.

WHY DO COLLIES CHASE AND HERD?

Collies want to 'eye', stalk, herd and chase things because it is a form of behaviour that makes total sense to them; it is what they have been selectively bred to do for generations. This instinct is so strong and compelling that in the absence of anything more appropriate to 'work' (for example livestock), these dogs will direct it on to anything else that is moving at eye level, especially if it is particularly animated or noisy.

Moreover, the simple act of chasing will give Collies an instant 'high' and this can lead to the behaviour becoming addictive and thus compulsive/obsessional over time.

The key to dealing with this sort of behaviour is to appreciate that, much like a shepherd, you have to train some fundamental control commands - for example stop, down, stay, instant recall - into your Collie as early and as relentlessly as possible. Without such training he could rapidly become a frustrating - if not dangerous - liability.

Control command training for Collies needs to be done in a gradual, specific way. It is usually easier to start the process with your dog on a long line; and any sign of co-operation from the dog must be consistently, and generously, rewarded.

THE COLLIE NIP REFLEX

It's important for all owners to know about the classic nip reflex in sheepdogs; this is often misread as a sign of bad character.

The sheepdog's capacity to launch an intimidatory or defensive nip or snap, whenever faced with sudden pressure or arousal (such as excitement, threat, fear, rapid oncoming movement) operates on a purely instinctive level. Without this instinct a sheepdog would soon lose the respect of any livestock he was working or, worse still, run the risk of being badly injured by any animal he could not keep at bay with such intimidating behaviour.

Given a suitable arousal trigger, the nip reflex can be seen in Collies with otherwise exemplary characters, although they may choose, or be trained, to direct this instinct on to toys rather than other people/dogs.

If you want to keep the nip reflex in your own Collie under better control, you need to be able to anticipate the triggers that activate it, such as sudden, head-on approaches from people/dogs/cars/bikes; over-excitement in play or when chasing things; sudden noises, commotions or a generally more stressed - and as a result far more reactive - frame of mind.

At such times you must give your dog an alternative control command to follow, such as down/stay, to defuse his aroused mental state.

COLLIES, AGGRESSION AND RELATIONSHIPS

The Collie's natural expectation in life is to work for one boss who tells him what he should be doing at any given time. This is the one social relationship that makes total sense to sheepdogs; others can be a lot more confusing.

One of the main reasons why Collies become nervous or fearful characters, or become aggressive towards other dogs or people, is down to some inner sense of unease or insecurity about their living environments, or general confusion as to how they should relate socially to those around them.

The natural social confidence and competence that we tend to take for granted in many pet dogs is often lacking in sheepdogs. And this is because they were traditionally bred to focus entirely on one person and one job, and otherwise live fairly reclusive lives. Not only will they usually have lived outside, rather than within, a family home but their daily contact and interaction with strange people and dogs will have been pretty limited.

This underlines how vital it is to train your Collie to be socially confident from as early an age as possible, with plenty of positive and happy experiences with different dogs and people. Sometimes, even if you do this, Collies can still become wary or snappy with other dogs/people as they grow older. If this happens with your dog, then it is time to revert to the shepherd's role again; making it clear to the dog how all social encounters should proceed, rather than simply letting him decide this for himself and get things wrong through insecurity or panic.

BULLYING AND MANIPULATION

Collies are pushy dogs - that's what they're born to be - and they cannot resist testing all the boundaries.

If you want a harmonious domestic life with your Collie, then any attempt to get attention from you on demand, through pressurizing behaviour like barking, whining and nudging, must be ignored.

Do the same whenever he uses this behaviour to make things happen faster, like walks, meals or games. Just blank the dog the instant he tunes up and calmly walk away from him. Refuse to acknowledge him until he is settled and quiet.

Thereafter make it clear to your Collie that only you, and other household members, will decide when any good things are going to happen in your house. Moreover if your Collie wants these things, he must obey a command first - for instance a down/stay.

Collies who are allowed to manipulate owners or other household members may resort to more intimidatory or aggressive behaviour as their sense of superiority grows. Dogs like these are in urgent need of demotion within the household pack; their access to any more prestigious areas (for instance beds, bedrooms or settees) or resources in the home may have to be restricted too.

THE AMAZING COLLIE MIND

After many years of owning, training and studying Collies, the complexities of the sheepdog mind have never stopped surprising or amazing me.

Collies can be forceful, excitable characters, but at the same time incredibly sensitive, intuitive and loyal. They can be exceptionally willing dogs, yet so proud, and so easily demoralized or damaged by less sympathetic treatment or approaches to training.

When Collies are properly understood and managed they can be uniquely rewarding companions. And that's why it saddens me when I have to dwell on more negative aspects of their behaviour as

pets.

Fundamentally Collies can only be what they were bred to be - and there's still nothing about them that I would want to change.

DE-STRESSING A COLLIE

Stress is so endemic among pet Collies that many owners believe that it is normal for these dogs to behave in a manic, excitable, or over-reactive way - when it's not. Collies are thinking dogs as well as athletes but their ability to learn, or act calmly and confidently in response to owner's commands, will be greatly diminished by the effects of stress.

Owners need to understand how rapidly the sensitive Collie psyche can enter a stressed state and how long this mental state can be sustained once it is activated. Also, what a detrimental effect this will have on a dog's behaviour long and short-term, and how you can keep this problem to a minimum.

Some of the factors that influence stress levels in pet Collies are listed below, followed by possible solutions:

Diet - Diets too high in fat, protein and/or artificial additives can make for an over-heated

Collie. *Solution*: Switch your dog on to a diet with lower fat and protein levels. Also make sure any food or treats you feed him are free of any artificial additives.

Physical over-excitement - Collies need daily physical exercise but steady distance work is

best. Allowing them to continually hare around chasing things (balls or other moving objects) puts them into an over-aroused/stressed state. *Solution*: Appreciate that as long as something is moving at their eye level, many Collies will feel compelled to chase it, even to the point of physical exhaustion. Keep chase exercises to a minimum and intersperse these with plenty of mental tasks which will wind the dog down again.

Mental under-stimulation - Collies have a tremendous hunger for mental work or tasks, as

well as physical exercise. Mental work has the effect of placing Collies in a far calmer frame of mind. *Solution*: Scent and search work - getting your dog to find toys, treats or your personal items hidden around the home/garden - or formal Obedience exercises are good examples of mental calmers for Collies.

General anxiety - Over-lengthy confinement at home, devoid of suitable physical/mental

stimulation, or more hostile handling from owners - especially shouting/scruffing - stresses many Collies out. *Solution*: Don't do these things if you want a quieter/happier dog! And always be calm towards your dog in both manner and tone of voice.

Mental over-stimulation - Sometimes living in a family home gets very stressful for Collies in

terms of the constant activity and noise levels - and the end result is an over-excited dog. *Solution:* Appreciate that sheepdogs go on being stimulated, mentally, as long as there are sources of stimulation going on around them. So give your Collie his own special cosy den in a quiet part of the house. This is where he will go, or where you will place him, whenever he starts heating up and needs to rest and wind down.

If your dog is excessively excited - barking, whining, and jumping madly about - do not grab him roughly or shout at him as, in his over-aroused state, you could make matters worse.

Simply put a slip lead on him, very calmly, and without a word, place him in his den and shut the door. Ignore any protests, however loud, until your dog has been quiet for at least five minutes. When you eventually go back to him he will either be in a much calmer and more sensible frame of mind - or blissfully asleep!