

When Harry met Staffy

Staffordshire Bull Terriers unruly behaviour

Harry, the 12 month old cinnamon coloured Cavoodle loved his walks and in particular running around the local park, joyful and eager to greet anybody and everybody of both the two and four legged variety.

On a recent walk at the park on frosty Sunday morning Harry approached Billy a 2yo brindle Staffy who was being walked on the lead by his owner through the park. Billy immediately became quite tense at Harry's approach and pulled firmly on the lead to greet his scruffy little visitor. There was a quick sniff nose to nose then an 'awkward' pause and then all hell broke loose - Billy snapped at Harry grabbing him by the side of the face. Both owners horrified by the situation immediately trying to separate the two amid Harry squealing and Billy being quite stationery but refusing to let go. After what seemed minutes, Billy let go, seeming quite passive about the situation. Owners quickly swapped names and contact details (and choose words!), and Harry was rushed off to the vet. The outcome was not quite as sweet as the movies, but Harry mended after receiving several stitches but the mental scars remain, now being quite skittish around other dogs.

*Please let me state right from the start, that **I have met many many wonderful, well adjusted friendly obedient Staffy's** and would never suggest they are a bad breed in general terms. My following comments are founded on Staffy's indicating a higher percentage of problematic dog to dog aggressive behaviour than other breeds.*

A Brief History

The Staffordshire Bull Terrier or 'Staffy's' are arguably one of Australia's most popular breeds yet also can be the most problematic, particularly when it comes to getting on with other dogs.

When analysing any breed I think it's worth understanding where they come from and what they were bred for and thereby understanding their strengths and weaknesses.

The Staffy has early roots from early 1800's and come from the English county of Staffordshire, which back then, was an iron foundry area where people were hard working and tough – consequently their dogs had to be as well. They were often used as fighting dogs, and although small in stature were a formidable fighter naturally incredibly well toned with strong necks and jaws.

They have always been known for the loyalty to people especially to the family and generally great with kids and most humans. Staffys are a breed that needs family interaction but also need rules and boundaries, as much, if not more, than other breeds. Being left for many hours while the families away, may create stress as they enjoy and need human interaction from a game, to a ride in the car, to a walk around the block. They can only be described as a faithful, and a loyal family companion. They are highly intelligent but also stubborn and do enjoy one on one training - which is a must for new Staffy owners!

Staffy dog to dog aggression

The way to assess why a dog acts the way they do, you need to address their motivating factors and their triggers to 'act'. In the case of Staffy's, in order to analyse their anti socially behaviour towards other dogs you have to dig into their :

- natural temperament
- their natural family DNA
- their training and experiences from an early age.

All of these factors will affect their behaviour , obviously not are all 'changeable or modifiable'. You cannot change a dogs natural temperament or DNA – i.e their personality or character, consequently without bursting a owners optimism to change their dogs behaviour – turning a Cugo into a Miss Congeniality can be a mighty big ask even with the best intentions and training techniques. But do not give up! Read on!!

There could be considered two types of assertive aggression, with Aggressive Dominance being more common in Staffy's .

1. Fear based – these guys tend to be those big 'chickens ' who may act tough and show bravado in their behaviour which they act out in order to intimidate other dogs to back off.
2. Aggressive Dominant - could be described as aggression shown by a highly confident dog towards another dog that it considers to be a lower ranked and a less confident dog, and will often lunge and bite and hold in order to put others in their place (I believe there is no factual foundation for any dog to have the physical mechanism to 'lock' their jaw).

Often this behaviour is made worse at an early age when they treated like babies. They get lots of love, affection, and praise for doing nothing or very little, with no rules or boundaries on their behaviour. Food, couches, and toys would be unrestricted and bluntly put, owners have turned them into 'spoilt little brats', that encourage dogs to insist on getting their way. Being a loyal breed , this may not be a problem at home but when 'out' they may turn into a Mike Tyson acting first and asking questions later. Based on their instinct (in their genes) and partly by a 'poor' up bringing, some Staffy's may feel a need to control another dogs behaviour. A typical reaction of a dog with this issue may be when another dog approaches the Staffy it will show a lack of focus on the owner and an 'over focus' and possible reaction towards the other dog (even if the dog is no threat)

Staffy puppies

It would appear a Staffy's adrenaline gland pumps out adrenaline at an extreme rate and can go from 0 – 100 in a blink of an eye. I believe this adrenaline 'issue' can somewhat be stemmed by continually restricting any intense level of play with other dogs from a young age. I would highly recommend all socialising with other pups or family/ friends dogs be short and very calm and never allowed to 'escalate' into full on wrestling 'rough' type play. At puppy school an owner should be proactive in only allowing calm interactions – sometimes people may say your being precious and let them play – let them, it's not their anti social dog they will have to live with for many years to come.

Staffy's will often play rough and tough and will sometimes 'bully' other dogs with their stocky build creating situations that intimidate and scare other dogs. Left unchecked this can turn into scrap which can mentally scare both dogs. From a physical standpoint the adrenaline gland has been left open for too long and this can become a 'bad habit' which leads to continual interactions of fighting rather than playing. They are like boys playing in the school yard – it starts off fine and then turns into a battle of strength (and will sometimes end in tears!) Boys get over it, but some dogs will from then on have their boxing gloves on from the moment you walk out the front door. Often they will not even sniff out the 'street gossip' of lamp post smells, but rather are on alert for any 'targets' that may be out.

Be Proactive not re-active – get in early !

Popular Dog Training TV shows can fool people into thinking that constant corrections when dogs react badly will 'fix' issues however I feel this is masking the issue and a dog may, temporarily avoid this short term punishment – making certain trainers look good on the big screen! Dogs will often revert back to old habits quickly and maybe worse as they may have stressful and aggressive memories of previous meetings and situations. For this reason in particular I do not like check chains – how can strangling a dog make it calmer and more relaxed when meeting another dog? On the other side of the coin often just the use of treats as a way of luring their attention away from another dog may also not work (although not causing any future emotionally issues). Reward based training I have found not always successful particularly without a professional recommending a strict strategy. This system seems to take 'forever' and particularly with stubborn Staffy's. It can also be tricky to reward a dog for not reacting at another dog in an uncontrolled environment.

A proactive approach teaches a dog what we want them to do prior to them reacting in way the dog thinks appropriate. To ascertain the first few moments of your dogs 'tenseness', try to read a change in their body language (e.g. erect tail, a wrinkled frown or staring for too long). A quick short fast message to avert their focus away from a potential target and not allow the adrenaline and focus to build is essential – this can be done using a verbal 'cue' to look at you (doing some early training to respond to their name perhaps and look at you in the eye comes in handy) i.e. be proactive rather than reactive, but without being harsh. Where a verbal cue is not strong enough to divert their attention I have also successfully used a water spray bottle, water pistols (a squirt to the head!) or rattling a small can with stones in it – a verbal 'growl' at the same time is also important. The next step should be followed with positive reinforcement when they make the conscious decision not to respond to that previous trigger.

Physical punishment of unwanted behaviour will not generally work and often will create a dog that is intimidated by you and you risk losing the bond of friendship and trust and may even create more stress in the poor dog, equating to an even more unstable dog.

Being as stubborn as they are, fixing this problem in Staffy's is never easy and obviously it's better not allow this issue to nurture itself from a young age. If you are experiencing this anti-social behaviour keep up with some tougher rules within your home and try to keep all interactions with other dogs short and sweet, trying to develop constant positive habits of greeting – building both confidence they have in you (and self confidence in you the owner) and establishing new greeting manners.

Professional help may help but check their references and qualifications and ask about their experience with this sort of issue.

Good Luck

Alan Sheppard

Secret Dogs Business