

Adolescence 101 – What happened to my sweet baby boy????!

by Shannon White

So you got your leo puppy through puppyhood. You taught him basic manners, conditioned him to allow his feet and teeth handled, let him explore the world at his own speed, and socialized him extensively. And for a while it was smooth sailing.

Then one day a noise emerges from your sweet puppy's throat as another dog approaches. Rumbling up as though from the depths of some chasm you never knew was in him, it fills the air with an ominous sound.

GRRROOOWWLLL! Grumble, growl, snark, ROAR!!! Bark bark bark! Growl!

Soon other behaviors begin to appear in conjunction with these noises. Stiff-legged posturing with the chest pushed out, the head up, ears forward, tail held up high like a plumed sword. He starts kicking up the grass and dirt after he pees. He hikes his leg on inappropriate things, such as cars, other dogs, and people!

Perhaps most worrisome is that while he used to be so easy to take places because he loved everybody (human and dog alike), now he growls and hackles at other dogs, can't concentrate in class, and no longer plays nice with others. Not even the girls! What happened to that sweet, easy-going, social puppy you had just a few weeks ago? What went wrong?

Nothing is wrong. Your puppy has entered the next stage on his way to becoming an adult. Unfortunately, this stage is often the most challenging and frustrating stage. It is adolescence. (cue dramatic music: dun-Dun-DUNNNN!)

In our large breed, these hormonally driven changes in behavior are often loud and potentially embarrassing for the owner. Mortified by your boy's obnoxious noises and behaviors, you may begin to leave him at home when you go to shows or any gatherings where there will be other dogs, particularly other intact male dogs. Unfortunately, though this does keep him from making his displays in public with plenty of witnesses, it does not teach him how to deal with these new sensations he is having, and it may actually intensify his reactions at future gatherings.

What remains, then, is to guide your intact adolescent leo through this stage, so that he can emerge on the other side as a well-adjusted adult. And rest assured, he will emerge in time. But buckle in, because it can be a bumpy ride, and it can last quite a while with some dogs.

The first thing to do when adolescence rears its loud, obnoxious, and chaotic head, is to stay calm. Sounds easy enough, but when your boy emits his first public display of stupidity, it can be difficult to keep your cool. It's important that your reaction not be infused with emotion or anger, shock or surprise. Don't waste precious time or energy worrying about what other people are thinking about your dog's outburst. Just address it directly to the dog. That's where it all has to start.

Realize that his display, though embarrassing to you, is very natural. He is no longer a baby, but not yet an adult. Suddenly he is keenly aware of the smells and sights assaulting his brain, bombarding him with messages he does not yet understand but knows only that they are important. He will quite literally be overcome by the intensity of his own reaction to these stimuli at times. You need to stay calm to avoid adding to the intensity of the situation.

The next thing to do is reestablish what behaviors are expected of him. If you have slacked off in your training because he was so easy to live with for a while, this is the time to get back to it. If you have been training all along, you may actually need to back up a bit and treat him as though he is a younger puppy again. Give him clear and simple tasks to occupy his brain in potentially stressful situations.

Remember to tell him what you DO want him to do, instead of just telling him NOT to do something else. If you say to a child not to touch the plate of cookies in front of him, it becomes an all-consuming thought in that child's brain to touch that plate of cookies. If you just tell your dog NOT to growl or stare or posture, and don't give him something else to accomplish instead, he will naturally focus all the more on that other dog daring to look at him or to breathe the same air he is breathing. Instead, give him a task that is contradictory to what he wants to do. He cannot lunge and posture at another dog when he is heeling in the other direction or sitting with his back to the dog, etc.

The basic behaviors your dog should have reliably on cue are heel, sit, down, come, and leave it. If your dog can't do these commands amid distractions, then they are not reliable. Train train train! Be prepared to work on them in public.

Learn to recognize the body language cues that your dog has fixated on another dog. Note the stillness that comes over him when he fixates on another dog, the forward ears and closed mouth. These usually appear before the raised head and stiff spine, and before the lifted tail. If you catch him early, he will be easier to redirect at that point than when he has puffed out his chest and roared, or lunged.

There is a caveat here. It is easy to end up in surveillance mode when you have a boy going through this stage, constantly scanning your surroundings for any potential trigger that may set the boy off. You think you are thinking ahead, but you unintentionally transmit an anxious and tense atmosphere to your dog by doing this, and in that state of mind your own reactions to the dog's behavior are likely to be emotional and tense. Don't try to anticipate every single incident before it happens, just be prepared to deal with every incident as it happens. After all, if he never gets the chance to make a mistake, you never get the chance to address it and correct it.

Should it happen that your boy has a blow-up, going off at another dog, particularly if it elicits a similar response out of the other dog, address it quickly and calmly, and then immediately put him through some quick and simple obedience tasks. Heel, sit, heel, down, heel, come, finish, down/stay, etc. In layman's terms these simple but effective tasks have the effect of lowering the fight-related chemicals in his bloodstream. Blood tests have shown rapid reductions in these chemicals immediately after such obedience tasks, compared to the hours, and even days, they may remain elevated in the dog left to his own devices to calm down. Those chemicals are nature's way of preparing a dog to fight for his right to mate or to defend his territory. They are not helpful in the lives of modern domesticated Dog. And in non-chemical terms, these simple tasks also serve to remind the dog who is actually in charge (you).

Do not just put the boy in his crate after he has had a scuffle with another dog. All this does is allow him to remain in that charged up state of mind and chemical arousal. "Time out" does not work for adolescents, chemically or mentally. It is better for him if you keep him out and work him through the after-effects of his explosion until he is back in a calm state.

One other important note, for anyone who has allowed young children to show or compete with the dog prior to this explosion of hormones, this bumpy stage is not a good time to continue that practice. Be sure that whoever holds his leash as he goes through these stormy waters is prepared and physically able to control him and address the behavior when it appears. This is an age when many young dogs discover how strong they are, when they manage to overpower the people holding their leashes and self-reward by getting to the thing they want by sheer force. Once your boy is back in his right mind and the hormones have reached a normal adult balance, he can once again be the junior handler's dog or go into rally or out for a walk with a child handler.

Remember that your dog is always learning, not just in when he's in class. Be prepared to continue his education at all times as he navigates his way through adolescence. The more consistent and calm you are in the process, the better his chances that he will emerge on the other side into adulthood without any lasting effects.