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Your Smart Dog

Can You Recognize Stress Among Dogs?

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If you live with more than one dog, or if your dog regularly plays with other dogs, you may have wondered at some point, “Are the dogs having fun?” or “How much is too much” in terms of physical play. If you pay attention to their interactions, and their overall mood, you’ll gather clues to help you answer that question.

Just this month I noticed the chemistry among the dogs in my house had changed. The two Labradors, Tango and Lily, lost their upbeat, happy-go-lucky attitudes, while Lucky, the patriarch Australian shepherd, was keeping more distance between himself and the other dogs – and us.

My first thought was health-related – maybe they all caught a virus. But then I noticed another difference – Nemo, the latest addition to our pack, seemed to be feeling much more confident than normal, asserting himself by stealing toys from the Labs and begging for a game of chase, or “bugging” them to play almost non-stop. Slowly, I began to see a pattern. The root of the behavioral changes in my little pack was Nemo! This month’s newsletter focuses on stress among the dogs in the household or in a play group and offers tips on what signs to look for and how to remedy the situation.

Recognize the Change

The signs of trouble were very subtle in the beginning and easily missed. It didn’t seem odd that Nemo, still a youngster and full of energy, wanted to play more often than the older dogs. I found myself laughing less at his antics, however, when the other dogs would tire and “tell him off,” by snapping or growling

at him. You may notice that playtime is shorter or the other dogs show less enthusiasm and more impatience than normal. Often, the dogs’ interactions with the humans in the household are also affected. The dogs may be more

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reserved, more likely to spend time away from you instead of being your constant shadow. Each dog reacts to stress differently, and your dog may have other signals. The important point is that you take notice when things seem a bit off in your household.

Body Language

Look at your dog’s tail and ears – a dog that is having fun will have a loosely wagging tail. It will be sticking straight out or curved slightly upward. Take note if you see a tucked tail -- a tail between the legs is a sign of stress in your dog – he may be feeling bullied. Also, be aware that a tail curved up over the dog’s back is a sign of assertiveness – your dog may be the bully.

Watch your dog for signs that he’s done with playing and would like to rest. He’ll probably shake off, avert his eyes from his canine playmate, and wander off to flop down. Sometimes the other dog doesn’t pick up on those signs and tries for more than two or three minutes to keep the play session going,



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despite your dog's unwillingness to interact or play.

Mood

In our household, the change in our regular happy group signaled that we had a problem. All the dogs, except Nemo, seemed more subdued than normal. They weren't as interested in play, they even seemed less interested in affection from me. I thought it was the weather at first. We'd just had a week of very warm temperatures – perhaps the dogs were just too hot to play. Until I noticed that Nemo seemed even more energetic than usual. That didn't seem quite right and caused me to stop and examine the matter more in depth. Your dog may be grumpier, more reserved, or may even appear to be depressed. Whatever the symptom is, be mindful that changes in mood may be caused by stress within the pack.

Energy Level

Not only did the dog's mood drop, but the dogs seemed to be less physically active as well. They avoided playing with Nemo and willingly gave up an object when he pranced over to see what they had. If they could talk, I think they would be saying "Here, just take it and leave me alone, ok?" Even the interaction between the otherwise playful Tango and Lily was curtailed. I think they simply wanted to "lay low" themselves to avoid drawing Nemo's attention.

Implementing Change

As soon as I recognized the dynamics, I immediately began to implement changes to help resolve the stress that my pack was feeling. I only wish I had noticed it sooner.

Managing the Environment

Allowing the other dogs in the pack a "safe place" that was off-limits to Nemo was my first task. For some dogs it was their crate – when they went in voluntarily, I would close the door

so Nemo couldn't follow. It wasn't latched, they could exit whenever they wanted to simply by nosing the door open. But it prevented Nemo from entering and pestering them.

Nemo isn't allowed outside when the other dogs were playing their favorite game. Tango's favorite thing is to retrieve. Nemo wasn't interested in getting the ball himself; rather he was interested in preventing Tango from getting it. He would slam into Tango as they were running, run in front to trip him up, and otherwise be a real nuisance. Now, Nemo stays indoors until Tango enjoys an uninterrupted game of fetch with me.

Lily's favorite thing isn't really a game, instead it's quiet time with us. She's happiest when

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she's sitting in someone's lap. Before we implemented these changes, Lily was continually fending off barks and nips from Nemo. He wanted her to play with him, that was clear, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He'd finally wear her down and she would jump down and find a corner in which to lie.

Monitoring Dog to Dog Interactions

Pay special attention to your dogs when they are together. Make a point to give these interactions your complete focus and attention. Watch their interactions, even videotape them if you can. I'm always amazed at the body language that I miss when I'm watching in the



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heat of the moment. I see so much more when I videotape their interactions and then watch them back, sometimes in slow motion.

In my household, instead of allowing Nemo free reign to play with whomever and for as long as he desired, I began monitoring his interactions with each dog. If they didn't want to play with him, I didn't allow Nemo to continue his solicitations. I gave him something else to play with or I removed the other dog from Nemo's reach.

I saw Nemo engaging in behaviors that are related to status in the pack such as putting his chin on top of the other dogs' shoulders, body

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slamming into them (running quickly toward the other dog and not avoiding the collision), and stealing their possessions. When I saw the beginnings of any of these behaviors, I interrupted it by calling Nemo's name and redirecting him to another dog toy. The other dog would take that opportunity to go to their safe place or find a spot close to me in which they felt protected.

Basic Obedience

The above suggestions will be much easier to implement if your dogs have solid basic skill such as sit, down, come when called, and know how to give you attention. Brush up on those basic skills – you'll progress faster if these skills are solid (by solid I mean that your dog knows what you are asking him and complies on the first request).

The signs of stress among dogs are sometimes subtle and may take time to recognize. Simply taking the time to observe your dogs' interactions yields insight on what's really going on. It took me longer than my dogs had hoped, I'm sure, but now that I'm aware of the problem and taking steps to restore the order I can already see a difference in my dogs. Nemo's a little confused, naturally, because the rules have changed for him. But I see my other dogs' glimmers of the old dogs that I know and love.

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