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### **Overactive Dogs**

*Muffy, a 6-year-old female cocker spaniel, occasionally whines when left alone and constantly pesters her owners while they are home. Muffy jumps into their laps when they sit down to read the newspaper or watch TV, and constantly brings her toys to them and barks if she is ignored. She often doesn't relax until they go to bed at night. Muffy's owners have tried walking her several times in the evening. During walks she is well behaved, but no matter how much exercise she gets, she still is hyperactive throughout the entire evening. Muffy is quiet in the morning and extremely active in the evening after her owners have returned home from a long day at work.*

Most of the time, what owner's believe is hyperactivity is actually a high level of normal behavior such as play, contact seeking, or exercise. Many instances of hyperactivity involve normal canine social behavior. Dogs and wolves are community animals that in the wild live in large, extended families comprised of many age groups. A social group consists of an adult male and female and their offspring. Often siblings continue to live in the group for several years. The puppies play with one another, their parents, older brothers and sisters as well as "aunts" and "uncles". A puppy is rarely left alone, since either a littermate or one of the adults will be with it. An older animal might even stay with the puppies while the rest of the pack hunts.

Young dogs are highly motivated to engage in reciprocal, social play with members of its social group, other dogs, other species of animals, and humans. A dog may be quite persistent in its attempt to entice someone to play with it. Social play is comprised of stalking, chasing, "tug of war" and rough and tumble fighting. Play often consists of bits and pieces of aggressive behavior sequences such as dominance gestures, defensive and offensive threats, and predatory chases and attacks. It often includes growling and inhibited bites. Play is accompanied by signals that indicate to the playmate that this really is play and not serious aggression. Such signals include play bows, in which the dog assumes a posture with its rump in the air and its head and shoulders lowered; tail wagging; inhibited bites; pawing with the front foot; and open panting mouth (or "play face"); and a cocked head.

### **Types of Hyperactivity**

A young healthy dog that is a single pet in a household (particularly if it is left alone for many hours) is highly motivated to try to engage its owners in play. Owners often perceive play activity as hyperactivity. The problem is compounded by confinement while the owners are at work all day. When the dog is released upon the owners' return home, s/he is usually even more active because of the isolation and restricted activity. Rather than trying to suppress play, which is difficult at best and can even impair the attachment between dog and owner, the dog should be allowed to engage in vigorous play. The play, however, should be directed toward appropriate objects and should stop playing when the owner wants the dog to do so.

### **Exercise Exercise Exercise**

Long walks that allow the dog to sniff, explore and investigate its environment are sufficient exercise and play for some dogs. Forcing a dog to heel all the time deprives it of engaging in the normal levels of exploratory and investigatory activities. Inhibiting these behaviors outside may result in highly active behaviors at home when the owners would rather the dog be quiet. A retractable leash works well too for most dogs.

Frequent play with another dog is one of the best forms of exercise for a young dog. Some dogs can be trained to accompany the owner while bicycling. The games of "fetch", "tug of war", and catching a flying disc provide great exercise. Dogs often play tug of war with each other and frequently growl while doing so. Some people mistakenly confuse a "play growl" with real aggression and are worried about playing tug of war with their dog, but this activity does not necessarily lead to aggression or dominance (unless your dog is predisposed to this personality trait). You should, however, direct the game to a play object and not allow the dog to pull on clothing or directly on feet or hands.

While owners should allow their dogs to play actively, they must also be able to inhibit their dogs' activity level and bring it under control when it is time to stop. You can establish such control by first teaching the dog, when it is calm, to come, sit, lie down, and relax. Initially, your dog should learn to sit and stay for 2 to 3 minutes in quiet circumstances at home. Next, ask the dog to sit and stay for short periods after it has worn itself out playing. If s/he does well, you can then ask it to sit quietly for a few seconds during a play session before the dog becomes tired. Eventually, they should be able to sit and stay at any stage during play. At first, do not expect the dog to stay quiet long nor should you ask them to quiet down too soon after it has started

playing. You can also practice sit (or down/stays) throughout the day by asking the dog to sit or lie down whenever you know they want something, such as to be let in or out or to be fed or petted.

Extremely disruptive or damaging playful antics- such as running into the owner, rough leaps at the owner's body, or grabbing arms or pants legs- often can be stopped by using a startling, inhibiting stimulus such as a can of pennies or a loud noise from some other source. Owners should carry the noisemaker constantly if they have a dog that engages in these activities. The noise should be employed each time as the dog begins the disruptive behavior- for example, as it begins jumping at the owner. Sounding the noise too early or too late will not work. If applied appropriately, a startling noise will quickly teach a dog not to initiate such rough play. If the owner uses a word such as "hey" or "no" slightly before the startling noise, the word can then become an effective signal to stop.

When the owner makes the mistake of not providing sufficient play for a young active dog, but only punishes or isolates the dog for being "bad", the dog may become fearful of the owner, develop separation anxiety problems, or even become aggressive.

### **Attention Seeking Behavior**

Exaggerated and prolonged greeting of the owner and persistent attention seeking behaviors when the owner is home can sometimes be a sign of separation anxiety. These behaviors may continue for several hours and are often thought of as overactivity. A dog that exhibits overactivity due to separation anxiety usually engages, at least to some degree, in other signs of anxiety- barking, whining, urinating, defecating, chewing, or digging- when it is left alone. Such dogs usually greet their owners enthusiastically even if they are left alone for only a short time.

The treatment of separation anxiety can be complex, but it helps to gradually accustom a puppy to being left alone for short periods without displaying anxiety. It might also be necessary to teach the dog to sit/stay as you prepare to leave and when you return. Ignore them until they are settled, then only greet them after they are calm or in a sitting position.

If separation anxiety or excessive attention seeking is related to being left alone for more than 10 to 12 hours a day on a regular basis, the dog might be helped by a companion dog or by being taken out by neighbors periodically. There are also many wonderful doggie day care centers in the area and it helps most dogs to spend a day or two a week at one of these facilities (if they are not dog aggressive). Chatfield Reservoir dogpark is also a wonderful source of exercise and socialization.

## **Reinforcement**

Sometimes owners inadvertently reinforce their dog's overactivity. For example, they might chase their dog when it grabs a sock or spend ten minutes pursuing the dog in an attempt to grab a leash. The dog may think this is a great game, even though the owners certainly do not. Another example of inadvertent reinforcement is the owner's petting a dog that nudges or barks. While all such dogs are being "rewarded" for unwanted behaviors, simply stopping the reinforcement is not likely to cause the behaviors to disappear. The underlying reason(s) that is motivating the dogs to engage in play or attention seeking also must be addressed.

## **Breed Predisposition**

Some breeds of dogs, such as sled dogs and hunting breeds, have been selected for high levels of energy. If not allowed sufficient vigorous exercise, their activity level in the home may be overwhelming. This activity is not related directly either to excessive play or reinforcement from the owners but represents a strong motivation to run, hunt and/or explore. The only treatment is to provide such animals with sufficient exercise and also to train them to inhibit their activity upon command.

## **Physiological Influences**

Dogs with hyperkinesia, a rare physiological disorder, have been described as being overactive, unable to learn to inhibit activity, and difficult to teach to sit and stay. They also resist being restrained and are reportedly unresponsive to tranquilizers. The dogs, like some hyperkinetic children, respond to central nervous system stimulants such as amphetamine by becoming calmer. The diagnosis of this disorder must be made very carefully and treatment monitored a veterinarian. Ritalin is the drug of choice for this disorder.

There are several animal behaviorists and trainers we can recommend as well who can guide you to a more satisfying relationship with your dog. You will always need to start with *exercise, exercise, exercise*.

### **Trainers/Behaviorists:**

1. Bark Busters: 303-791-6291 or 1-877-500-BARK
2. Pupp-e-ssori 303-233-6520

### **Doggie Day Care:**

1. Camp Bow-Wow 303-797-2267 (Broadway/470)
2. Camp Bow-Wow 303-271-9663 (Golden)
3. Chatfield Animal Hospital 303-978-9750 (Ken Caryl & Carr)
4. My Pet's Place 303-683-0330 (SantaFe/470)