

## **Complete Control**

### **Why Your Dog Needs You to Provide an “Off Switch”**

**Beth Bradley**

At a recent competition, my dog, Fyte, was attacked and injured by another dog. We were not near each other; our dogs did not make eye contact: there was no reason or provocation for the attack. Worse yet, based on the nature of the injuries, it is clear that the other dog's intention in attacking was not to fight, but to kill. In spite of the unexpected aggression directed at him, my dog followed his training and did not respond with aggression. As a result, we were able to separate the dogs relatively quickly (although at the time, it felt interminable) and Fyte's wounds, thank goodness, will heal without permanent damage.

We cannot predict every circumstance we will encounter with our dogs, and unfortunate events happen. However, I could not help but reflect on the irony that the other dog attacked Fyte while reporting in for the obedience trial. This is a classic illustration of the importance of one of my most often repeated training maxims: Obedience should not and cannot be a “class” behavior or a “competition” behavior. Your dog must respect and trust your leadership at all times and in all situations. If the other dog had respected the owner's leadership, the owner would have been able to stop the dog with a simple command. In fact, if the other dog had respected his owner's leadership, the dog would never have taken it upon himself to initiate an unprovoked attack.

With aggressive and/or dominant dogs particularly, establishing that leadership can be challenging. Without it, however, your dog has no “off switch” when he feels aggressive. And a dog with no “off switch” is a danger to himself and others.

### **True Control**

If your dog has any form of aggression, you must be sure that you have control of your dog at all times. Being in control of your dog means much more than simply having him on a leash.

- Your attention can never waver from an aggressive dog when you are out and about. When you are out in public spaces or among other people with your dog, give your full attention to your dog and your surroundings. You cannot talk on your phone, chat with someone, or divide your attention in any other way and still monitor your dog fully.
- You must be certain that your dog will respond to your command 100% of the time. If he does not reliably obey when there are distractions, he will not obey when he is feeling aggressive. If you cannot stop him with a command, he could do serious damage to another person or dog by the time you are able to physically restrain him (if you are even able to physically restrain him!) If you do not have 100% confidence that your dog will respond immediately to your command to sit, down, or come, then do not take him out in public without a muzzle.
- Do not wait until your dog is acting on his aggressive tendencies to take action. If you know your dog growls, barks, or pulls when he sees other dogs walking by, give him a command *before* he reacts.

Commands must be respected immediately--not slowly, and not when the dog wants. And your response to disobedience or relaxed obedience should be swift and significant. If your dog has time to wonder, "Am I going to get away with this?" then you do not have complete obedience. You may need to use an Electric collar and/or prong collar to achieve this quick and automatic obedience. While some people worry that these training tools seem harsh, the potential injury or fatality your dog can cause if you allow him to remain unreliably trained is far more harsh—and irreversible. In fact, these collars reduce the number of corrections it takes for your dog to get the message.

### **You Can't Change Temperament**

Although effective training can change your dog's behavior, it cannot change his temperament. A trainer can show you how to handle a dog with an aggressive temperament in a way that minimizes any chance of you or anyone else being bitten. This in no way means that you have to wear kid gloves when interacting with your dog. Rather, it means that the trainer will teach you strategies to safely but effectively deal with situations such as when another dog is passing or when you must visit places such as a veterinarian's office where other people and dogs are likely to be present. In some cases, as mentioned earlier, a muzzle may be the safest option to prevent disaster. There are many different types of muzzles available, and your trainer can help you find one that is both humane and effective.

### **Now What?**

Your dog will have to be involved in a strict training program most of his life. Aggression problems never go away completely; the moment you relax your training, your dog will begin to test you. Structured training sessions with a professional will ensure that your dog gets the type and frequency of training that he needs. Regularly scheduled sessions with a trainer will ensure that you stay on top of the situation and recognize setbacks or improvements.

Do not be lulled into a false sense of security. If, over time, there are no incidents, do not take this as a sign you can relax your precautions. Rather, recognize it as a sign that your precautions are working. When in doubt, keep others safe. I am a bit of a worrier; I take no chances. But it is better to keep everyone safe than to risk a bite. Not only will you be keeping others safe, but you will be keeping your own dog safe. Different municipalities have different laws, but a dog that bites is always at risk of being removed from his owner's care and/or potentially euthanized.

### **Conclusion**

Developing a good training program is vital but you must also be 100% focused on your dog while he is out in public and be willing to correct harshly for any slight disobedience. A slow sit may mean not seem significant to you, but to your dog it means you are not focused or willing to enforce simple rules. The consequences of inconsistent training and expectations are significant and sometimes irreparable. Dogs can be unpredictable. Therefore, you must ensure that it is entirely predictable that your dog will respond to your commands quickly and without question. Your leadership sets the boundaries that keep him and others safe. When his aggression starts to percolate, you are the "off-switch" that dials it back down. His unquestioning obedience to you and reliance on your leadership could be the difference between life and death.

## **About Beth Bradley**

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains "cross-trained" companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles and championships in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland. Although Fyte is the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition, Beth and Fyte ranked third among the US competitors and posted scores that placed the US team in the top ten. Competing with Beth nationally, Fyte earned the title of USCA IPO 2015 Vice Champion. Most recently, Beth and Fyte competed for his national ranking. In spite of Fyte being injured in an attack by another dog during the competition, Beth and Fyte took first place overall and Fyte is ranked USA-1. In other words, he is, literally, the top dog in the United States!

## **CONTACT BETH**

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