

Hope for a “Bad Dog”

By Sandra Kruczak

A few weeks ago I met three young men from the UK who were bicycling around the world. Yes, you read that correctly, around the world. They were sitting outside of McDonalds working on their bikes after eating “double orders” of food. I was fascinated by their journey and asked them many questions.

When I told them I was working with some families and their dogs in Steamboat Springs, they had many questions to ask me about dogs. Cyclists are often chased by loose dogs, but their questions were more of a personal nature. I was a little surprised at this, thinking, “You’re cycling around the world and you want to know about your dog’s behavior?”

I suppose you always go back home to family, and dogs are a big part of that. They might have also been a little homesick for their pets. One young man asked me a question that caused me to take pause. He said, “Is there any hope for a bad dog?” The look on his face made me realize that this question reflected great personal pain.

When I begin training with a new family, I ask them to list the behaviors they want to work on. They’re usually very specific, listing pulling on leash or jumping up for example. I’ve seldom heard someone refer to their dog as an “overall bad dog”.

I explained to this young cyclist that when a behavior is performed, if we look carefully, we will see that there are specific environments that set the occasion for that behavior. There are also consequences that will predictably increase or decrease the frequency of that behavior.

An example might be: A person walks through your front door and reaches his hand toward your dog. Your dog snaps at his hand and the person withdraws his hand. We could predict that the person won’t try to reach for your dog again. We could also predict that your dog will try this again at the front door because it worked for him to prevent the person from reaching into his space.

This same dog may play fetch in your back yard. He may lie on the floor with your teenage son. He may walk quietly on a loose leash. There are usually very good parts to every dog’s behavior. There also may be some very specific situations in his life where he’s uncomfortable and perhaps hasn’t been taught what to do. These are the spots that we can start some training.

It’s good to take a close look at the whole picture before using the label “bad dog”. There’s usually more to the story.

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