

CANINE SUBMISSIVE URINATION

By Laurie Bergman, VMD, March 2001

Dogs, like humans, are social animals. Similarities in human and canine social structure (e.g., living in groups, extended care of the young, communal hunting) have contributed to dogs becoming "man's best friend." However, the many differences between canine and human social behavior and communication can lead to miscommunication, misunderstandings, and what humans consider "behavior problems." From a dog's perspective, for example, submissive urination is perfectly normal; but owners have real concerns about this behavior.

What's Going On?

A complex communication system has evolved among dogs to help establish and maintain stable pack dominance hierarchies, which are essential for a pack to work together in caring for young, hunting, and defending territory. Dominant animals use vocalizations, gestures, and postures to communicate their status. Subordinate animals use submissive displays to turn off these dominant social threats. When dogs live in "packs" made up of their owners and other humans, they use the same gestures to communicate. Problems arise when humans do not understand these gestures or expect dogs to understand things about human society that do not come naturally. For example, humans expect dogs not to eliminate inside the house. A 7lb Yorkshire terrier may not defecate in the room where it sleeps (i.e., its den) but may defecate on the living room rug because it sees the rest of the house as fair game.

Submissive urination is the ultimate gesture of submission. Submissive urinators communicate that they are absolutely no threat to other dogs. In response to the submissive signals, dominant dogs stop their display.

Submissive urination can be seen in dogs of any age or sex. It is most common in puppies, which makes perfect sense because they are automatically subordinate to all the adults in the pack. It is also more commonly seen in females and smaller breeds. Submissive urination occurs when dogs are confronted with facial expressions, body postures, or gestures that they perceive as a threat (see Case Examples, Case 1), including humans reaching for them; petting them on the head; leaning over them; talking to them in excited, deep, or harsh tones; making eye contact with them; or punishing them verbally or physically. In canine communication, dominance gestures include staring, standing over, putting a paw across the back of another dog's neck, and low growls. Dogs simply interpret human actions as they would another dog's actions.

While submissively urinating, dogs usually show other submissive signs, including laying their ears back, tucking their tails, cowering, and avoiding eye contact. They may also give a submissive "grin" in which the corners of the lips are pulled back, exposing molars and premolars. This should not be confused with an aggressive lip lift, which shows the incisors and canines. Some dogs roll onto their sides, exposing their bellies, while giving these signals and urinating. This is not a request for a belly rub; it is a request to be left alone.

Dogs that submissively urinate expect that their behavior will stop "threats" from humans, but well meaning humans continue leaning over, petting, and trying to comfort these dogs as they would another

person. Dogs see this as a continued threat rather than a comforting gesture. Punishing these dogs will only exacerbate the situation. A typical scenario is the owner who is frustrated because his dog urinates on the carpet every time he comes home. Believing that he has "caught the dog in the act," the owner scolds or otherwise punishes the dog for what he believes is a housebreaking lapse. Thus a dog that is already intimidated and trying to say with its only "words" that it respects the owner's authority is met with further threats, resulting in more frequent and intense displays of submission.

Excitement Urination

Excitement urination, a variation of the submissive form, usually occurs during greetings. Dogs with this behavior often do not show other signs of submission. Instead, they seem happy and excited to be greeted by humans. These are the puppies that urinate when greeted and then wag their tails and jump on humans, splashing urine all over.

Changing the Behavior

The prognosis for dogs with submissive urination is good: most puppies and young dogs outgrow the problem as they mature and gain confidence in social situations. Treatment relies mainly on owner education and patience. Owners must learn to accept submissive urination as a normal part of canine social behavior. The battle is half won when owners accept that their dogs have not lost their housebreaking skills and are not being spiteful.

The next step is identifying and avoiding the stimuli that lead to submissive urination. Everyone (e.g., owners, their friends, veterinary caregivers) who interacts with dogs that exhibit this behavior should avoid doing anything that causes urination. For example, dogs with submissive urination should not be rushed toward when greeted; instead, they should be allowed to approach on their own. Humans should speak softly, avoid prolonged eye contact, and kneel down to avoid towering over these dogs. Ignoring these dogs for the first 5 minutes after arriving home may prevent overexcitement. These dogs should not be reached for, especially over the head; they should be petted under the chin, on the chest, and on the side of the neck.

Dogs with submissive or excitement urination may be helped by being taught an alternate greeting behavior or to associate greetings with a different set of emotional responses. These are forms of counter conditioning. Owners should be instructed to meet their dogs at the door with a treat or toy. The dogs will learn to anticipate food or play when owners come home and be less likely to urinate. Especially with treats, owners can shape their dogs' behavior from an excited or submissive greeting to a calm one. When the dogs begin looking for the treat, owners should wait for them to sit calmly before giving it. Later, a treat should be given while their dogs are sitting calmly, being petted, and not displaying any Submissive gestures. Dogs with submissive urination should not be punished. Some dogs are so sensitive that even upset facial expressions or tense body language from owners is enough to elicit urination. The best way to avoid punishing dogs is to guide them toward appropriate behaviors. For example, instead of yelling "no" when their dogs jump on them, owners should teach them to sit. Dogs should be told the right thing to do, something that will result in praise and a reward, rather than being allowed to decide what to do, potentially resulting in scolding and punishment. Reducing the amount of punishment will help build the confidence of Submissive dogs and reduce their tendency to show such exaggerated submissive behaviors as urination. Other good confidence builders for dogs include positive

reinforcement/reward basic training for obedience or dog sports (e.g., agility, fly ball). These activities also help strengthen the owner/dog bond, which may have been damaged by frustration over urination.

Conclusion

Submissive urination is a commonly encountered, normal canine behavior. It is considered a behavior problem because humans do not want their dogs to urinate in socially unacceptable locations and situations. However, submissive urination is easily manageable. By teaching owners a little about canine social systems and communication, veterinary technicians can help them understand their dogs' behavior (see Resources). After owners understand and avoid eliciting the behavior, the submissive urination stops. Confidence building activities between owners and dogs can help end submissive urination and strengthen the owner/dog bond.

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