

CASE STUDY, ROMEO

Case Information

Subject: Romeo
Age: 2 years old
Species: Canine
Breed: Mix, curly haired, approximately 20 pounds
Sex: Male, neutered
Color: Black and white

History

Presenting complaint: Human-directed aggression
Acquired from: Pet shop
Age acquired: 6 weeks
Surgeries: Castration at age 8 months
Prior illnesses: Demodex from age 6 weeks to 6 months
Medications: Heartworm tablets, flea and tick spot treatment
Environmental history: Mostly indoors (house), yard time for play and exercise
Household: 2-parent home; son, age 17, daughter, age 12; daughter, age 8
Diet: Eukanuba lamb & rice, free-fed, commercial dog treats
Other animals: None

Primary Behavioral Complaints

Human-directed aggression. Client reports multiple bite incidents (most Level 1, per Dr. Ian Dunbar's Bite Levels Assessment¹, but a few more severe; one requiring stitches to the human)
Doesn't respond to obedience cues, especially around distractions
Door-dashing, running away, won't come back

Behavioral History

Romeo, acquired at 6 weeks of age from a pet shop, was an "impulse purchase." He is this family's first pet. Both parents had small dogs and cats when they were children. The family expected Romeo would be small, travel easily, be low maintenance, good with kids, and an all-around good companion.

Romeo was diagnosed with demodex at his first veterinary exam. He was treated almost continuously until about age 6 months with ivermectin, antirobe drops, cephalexin, ophthalmic ointment, Clavamox, and Dermcaps. The client reported that Romeo was very "mellow" as a young pup, and he did not exhibit any of the usual puppy behavior problems (biting, chewing, hyperactivity, etc.). The client followed the veterinarian's advice and kept Romeo mostly at home until he was 6 months old.

Romeo was enrolled in an obedience class as soon as he was well and medically released by their veterinarian. During class, Romeo either hid behind his handler or barked and lunged at other dogs. They dropped out after week 4 of the 6-week class because the mother was discouraged by a perceived lack of progress in training.

They practiced training at home and Romeo did become more responsive. However, by 8 months of age it was clear that problems were developing. Romeo got out regularly and would not come back on his own. They would chase and catch him to get him back in the house. The family attributed Romeo's desire to get out of the house to his intact status, so he was neutered at about 9 months.

Because Romeo barked and lunged at other dogs, strangers, and wheeled things such as bicycles, skateboarders, etc., the family stopped taking him for walks. He was unable to accompany his family on outings and trips. As a result, Romeo spent most of time in the house or in the backyard. His exercise came mainly from fence-fighting with the dogs next-door (his family interpreted this behavior as play), charging the front fence at passersby, and running laps around the pool, barking, as the kids played in the water.

Romeo also started charging the front window of the house, barking and growling as people walked, skated, or biked by.

Romeo has had little to no social interaction with other dogs.

The family is very socially active, and the home is frequently a center for kids and friends, pool parties,

and other active gatherings. Over time, Romeo's greeting behavior has become more reactive, with him growling, lunging, and barking at arriving guests.

Eventually, Romeo was denied access to the front door and was managed with baby gates to prevent him from charging people as they came and went, and also to keep him from dashing out the door. Even though he was no longer able to reach the door, any activity at the front door launched Romeo into ever-increasing spells of wild barking, growling, and circling, sometimes for 10 minutes or more. On occasions where multiple guests arrived over time, Romeo might engage in this behavior continuously for 45 to 60 minutes at a time.

The family tried having visitors offer Romeo treats by hand, but Romeo mostly refused to accept them. If he did take a treat, he'd move a few steps away and drop the food on the floor uneaten.

Finally, Romeo's "greeting" behavior became so unacceptable that he was put away in an upstairs bedroom when visitors were expected. Although this helped some, Romeo still barked and circled when the doorbell rang.

The biting incidents began when Romeo was 9 months old. Many of the incidents were preceded by some period of high excitement, which might include the arrival of visitors, a door-darting adventure, chasing around the swimming pool, or a fence-fighting session. A few involved a human attempting to remove a "stolen" object from Romeo's mouth. Three involved a human moving Romeo from one of his favored resting places, and one occurred when a family member startled Romeo awake with a hug.

After every bite incident, Romeo was verbally reprimanded with loud scolding. In some cases, Romeo was allowed to retreat to another room. In other cases he was chased, caught, and put outside or confined to another room. On some occasions he was "scruffed" and he was spanked with hands on a few others.

Romeo's family called because they were at wit's end and were considering euthanasia due to the severity of the biting.

I suggested Romeo be examined by their veterinarian, with the behavior issues presented as the reason for the exam. There was a basic health exam, blood work, and urinalysis; no remarkable findings were reported, no obvious physical or biological causes for the behavior.

Observations

On my initial consult Romeo began barking, lunging, and growling when I rang the doorbell, and continued doing so for about 15 minutes once I was inside. I insisted that Romeo be put away even though I was assured he would "calm down in a minute." He was put in a bedroom while I talked with the family. He continued to bark for 11 minutes. At the 20-minute mark, Romeo was brought back out and placed behind the baby gate. He resumed barking, lunging, and growling for a minute or so before settling down.

He continued to watch me constantly from the staircase landing, growling occasionally, pacing, and then eventually lying down. Because Romeo is small, black, and covered in dense, curly hair, reading his face from across the room was a challenge, but his gross body language was rigid. Sitting up, he positioned himself to face me but slightly off-center, with his face turned partially away but always watching me. Lying down, Romeo turned his back partway to me but kept his head turned so that I was always in sight.

About 90 minutes into the visit I asked the family to attach a drag line to Romeo's collar and remove the baby gate, which the mother did. Romeo charged out of his area and into the dining room, stopping short when he felt the drag line, but then continued to approach me. As he got within 5 feet or so, Romeo slowed down, crouched, and took a few slower steps forward with his head lowered, growled a bit, then retreated, backing away. I didn't look at him, and he repeated this behavior twice more.

As he retreated for the third time, I tossed a bit of beef dog food over his head and behind him to relieve "pressure" and encourage distance with reward. He went to investigate, found and ate the food, turned, and began approaching again. I tossed another treat over his head, and he retrieved it. Romeo's next approach was slower, but he wasn't crouching and compressed; he visibly relaxed as we continued this "game." In a few more iterations, he was standing next to my chair sniffing my pant leg. I dropped some treats on the floor, which he ate readily. I ignored him and Romeo sat quietly next to my chair for the next few minutes.

Using the treats, I was able to lure Romeo to "sit" and "down" several times. During our brief obedience training session, Romeo appeared relatively relaxed and engaged. He remained so throughout the session, but again "went off" as I approached the door to leave.

Assessment

Romeo lives in an almost constant state of emotional arousal, at or above threshold, practically awash in

triggers, including:

- Knocking on the door
- Ringing the doorbell
- Appearance of strangers
- People moving past the front window or fence
- Kids playing in the yard and next door
- Kids playing, splashing in the pool
- Dogs barking next door
- People approaching his favorite resting places
- Other dogs
- Cars, bikes, skateboards, strollers, and other wheeled objects

Negative indications/factors that likely contribute to the behavior issues:

- Early health issues
- Primary socialization deficit ²
- Incomplete/ineffective prior training
- Possible negative associations with some trigger stimuli (e.g., other dogs, strangers)
- Lack of social structure—from the dog's perspective ³
- Casual and unstructured lifestyle of his family
- Some ambivalence from the family (balancing concerns for liability versus euthanasia)

Positive indications:

- Owners have taken an organized approach to identifying and enumerating the issues
- Owners have expressed a genuine commitment to work the program, at least for the short term
- Romeo is relatively young and otherwise healthy
- Romeo appears very trainable; he was willing to adapt to my presence, taking treats and being compliant to training requests; I assessed him as a ready subject for a systematic counter-conditioning program, as well as for training other necessary behaviors

Intervention Recommendations—Consult #1

The objective is to manage Romeo's environment to reduce his overall stress and the practice of unwanted behaviors (opportunities for bites to happen). Owners state that if they can't achieve bite-free behavior, Romeo will be euthanized.

Stress Reduction/Behavior Management Program:

- Use drag line to control Romeo's door-dashing
- Use drag line to gently remove Romeo from favored resting places (humans' beds, sofa), pairing with the cue "off"
- Keep Romeo away from the pool when in use
- Prevent fence-fighting with other dogs ⁴
- Keep Romeo crated at night
- Block Romeo's access to the front window
- Define "safe zones" for Romeo: bedroom crate, family room dog bed, ex-pen in study
- Confine Romeo to a "safe zone" away from triggers when company comes
- Make sure he has some enrichments and distractions during these times
- Keep Romeo confined to a "safe zone" when not supervised to minimize his accidental exposure to triggers

Deference Program:⁵

- "Say please by sitting" ⁶
- Scheduled feedings of 15 to 20 minutes duration ⁷
- No gratuitous treats

Provided owners info on:

Enrichment puzzles and food dispensing toys⁸

Suggested giving Romeo at least one brisk 30-minute leash walk daily, during odd hours if necessary, to reduce his exercise deficit.

Basic Training Demonstrated/Instructed

Name recognition: When you're not interacting with Romeo but are in the same room, call out his name once to see if he looks your way. If he does, toss a treat to him or go give him a treat. If he doesn't, call his name when he is looking at you and toss him a treat. He must learn to associate his name with good stuff.

Basic attention exercise: With a treat in hand, raise your hand toward your face. When Romeo looks up at your face, praise warmly and give him the treat. Repeat several times a day. As time goes on, wait for him to look at you before he gets anything from you. Alternatively, hold a toy or treat to the side of and away from your face and wait for Romeo to look at you before giving the treat or toy to him. Stop luring for eye contact once the dog is easily able to do so, and notice and praise or treat unprompted eye contact throughout the day.

Sit: Place a treat between your thumb and forefinger and place your hand palm up in front of Romeo's nose. Lure his head up with the treat and your hand right at his nose until he sits. Immediately give the treat to him. Repeat several times without saying a word. When he automatically offers a sit, you can then start telling him "sit." The hand signal for "sit" is a flat palm raised upward as in doing a bicep curl. Think of "sit" as Romeo's way to say please and thank you and so on.

Down: A "down" is prone position with elbows and belly touching the floor or ground. From a sit, with a treat between thumb and forefinger, turn your palm down and again, place the treat at Romeo's nose. Lure his head straight down to the floor between his front legs. Many dogs slide backwards into the "down" while some require you to continue to lure him forward along the floor into a "down." The hand signal for "down" is a flat downward-turned palm pushing toward the floor. If, after practicing "down" regularly, he doesn't perform when requested, simply walk away with the treat or toy without saying a word.

Go to your place: Tell Romeo to sit. Toss a treat onto a target towel with an exaggerated arm motion. Praise by saying "good" when he steps on the towel to get the treat. Call Romeo back to you at least 5 or 6 feet away and repeat 6 to 8 times. After just a few short sessions, you will be able to tell Romeo to sit and point towards his towel without tossing the treat. Practice this regularly—while you're watching television, hanging out, cooking, eating, etc. Move his towel around the house and practice in multiple locations. Once he's good at this in the house, start doing it in the yard and around the swimming pool.

Stay: Romeo is to remain in a "sit" or "down" while you move away from and then return to him, before releasing him with a release cue such as "release," "all done," or "free" (choose one and make sure all family members use it consistently). Tell him to "sit" then "stay" and hold your flat palm facing him, much like a traffic officer tells motorists to stop. Every few seconds, give him a treat, praise, and remind him to "stay." Do this continuously until he's able to sit still for 1 minute while you also remain still. Work on "stay" at meal times and combine "stay" with "go to your place" in multiple locations around the house.

Recall: With Romeo just a few feet away, whistle or make a kissing sound with your lips to get his attention and say, "Romeo, come!" in an upbeat tone. As soon as he arrives in front of you, give him a treat. Pause. Touch his collar briefly while giving another treat. Ask him to sit and give another treat. Have another family member immediately repeat this process. Practice regularly in the house and yard and while on walks.

Drop It: Since Romeo loves to play fetch and does not guard his toys, use them to teach "drop it." Initiate a play session well away from any of his resting places. Offer a toy with one hand while having really delicious treats in the other hand. When he has the toy, place a treat at his nostril to give him the choice to drop the toy to get the treat. Tell him to sit, then toss the toy a short distance away. Repeat. Play this game regularly.

Trading games/object exchange:

This is to deal with Romeo's behavior of "stealing" objects. I demonstrated how to trade/exchange objects using two of his favorite toys. I emphasized that it was too early in the behavior modification process to take the stolen objects from him and that until the "drop it" toy game was well established, family members should NOT approach Romeo if he gets hold of an object that he has guarded before. Instead, I instructed them to walk away to another room to see if he would follow. If he did, they should play a game with a toy or take him out to the yard.

I outlined the plan through which Romeo will learn to relinquish stolen objects, with the goal being that Romeo will not steal objects at all. Again, I emphasized that eradicating this behavior is a process. I explained the

process as follows:

- Make a list of stolen and guarded items.
- Rank them in order of objects *he could not care less about* to those *he has stolen and bitten over*.
- Start with an object he could not care less about—that is, one he has never stolen or guarded. Give him the object. Take it out of his mouth then give him a treat. After he has eaten the treat, give the object back to him.
- Repeat.

Consult #2

No bites have occurred in the past three weeks. Dad now takes Romeo for a brisk 30- to 45-minute walk almost every day during the quiet evening time. A reduction in frequency and intensity of Romeo's outbursts when encountering people and other dogs on walks has been noted.

The family reports success using Romeo's safe zones. Romeo barks less when he hears other dogs barking outside, but still "goes nuts" if someone comes to the door.

Romeo has not been in the yard when kids are playing or swimming in the pool, or the neighbor's dogs or kids are out. Romeo now comes off the furniture easily with the drag line. No door-dashing incidents have occurred.

Scheduled feeding plan not 100% (mom leaves food down sometimes if Romeo doesn't eat readily).

Romeo still doesn't give up stolen items readily, but the family plays fetch/drop it games with toys and are practicing attention and object exchange exercises with objects of low value.

Identified and prioritized triggers and issues:

- Doorbell rings or someone knocks
- Dad or big brother approach Romeo in his favored resting places
- Barking/lunging at people and dogs while on walks

Instructed parents in desensitization/counter-conditioning (ds/cc) procedure (open bar/closed bar) for door bell/door knocking, including how to vary the intensity of the stimulus.¹⁰ Protocol as follows:

Put Romeo on a leash sitting beside the owner and have a helper give a very light tap on the door, directly followed by feeding Romeo many very high-value treats, one after another, for 3 to 5 seconds, regardless of his response. When tapping stops, food stops. Repeat several times, gradually increasing the loudness of the tapping (provided the dog is able to maintain his "sit" and relative calm) until the tap is an actual knock on the door. The exercise is successful when Romeo begins to look toward the owner when the knocking begins and he is visibly happy to hear the knocking (displaying the "yippee" response). Romeo will turn away from the door and orient to the owner in anticipation of a treat.

Instructed parents in ds/cc procedure for dad/big brother approaching Romeo's favored resting places. Protocol as follows:

Instructed dad and brother to approach the resting area and stop at a distance just as Romeo looks up and notices them (exercise should be started by just one person at a time, then worked together). From that distance, the person should toss a few yummy, high-value treats, one after another, and then turn and walk away. Repeat the exercise, gradually coming closer and approaching Romeo from different angles.

Discussed defensive strategies when meeting strangers and dogs on walks (emergency U-turn, using environment such as parked cars and bushes as visual barriers). Protocols as follows:

Practice emergency U-turns when there are no dogs or other triggers in sight. Practice them so that the people and dog find the exercise "normal." Once the action feels normal to all, practice the U-turn at a far distance from triggers, gradually moving closer to the triggers (or letting them approach closer). Be sure to keep the dog under his excitement threshold. Remember while turning to keep the dog engaged with the person, praising and treating (sometimes), walking briskly to prevent the dog from focusing on the approaching or triggering object.

Also instructed and practiced walking Romeo in an arc off the sidewalk and around parked cars and other visual barriers to prepare family members for situations in which they will need to increase the distance from people and other dogs. The goal is that, over time, they will be able to walk past people and dogs and remain on the sidewalk.

Consult #3

Four weeks after my last visit, there have been no bites. Scheduled feedings are on track. Romeo sleeps comfortably crated through the night. Romeo's doorbell reaction is greatly reduced. Romeo ate his dinner in the presence of a visitor a few nights earlier. Romeo responds to the "off" cue about 75%, and when he doesn't, he comes off willingly with the drag line.

Romeo still needs work on door stimuli, as well as relinquishing "stolen" objects. I instructed mom in ds/cc procedure for door bell/door knocking in the room closest to the door, with volunteers simulating entrances and exits.

The client expressed a preference for working on poolside triggers. I instructed mom in ds/cc procedure at the pool gate, and for activity in and around the pool. Family kids and their friends help by engaging in various levels of activity in and around the pool.

Consult #4

Three weeks after my last visit, there have been no bites. Romeo barks a few times at the doorbell or a knock, but stops right away. Romeo has stopped reacting to the pool gate, but still needs some work on activity in and around the pool. He now gets two walks daily, as mom has added a short morning walk.

Romeo eats full meals immediately, and sits to request everything. Mom noticed Romeo sitting quietly by the kitchen door watching the pool guy, something he used to react to. Romeo may begin fence-fighting with dogs next door, but now disengages when called indoors.

Priority issues are now door-dashing and coming when called. Taught mom the basic "stay" using positive reinforcement. We were able to move this exercise to the living room, and practice adjacent to the entryway. Before the visit was over, we had incorporated door knocking, doorbell ringing, and many other distractions.

Follow-up

Romeo responded rapidly to an overall reduction in stress levels and more structure and reliable human behavior. The owners' compliance level has been excellent. Although Romeo may not ever become a "social butterfly," the probability that he'll be able to live out his life happily in this home is reasonably high.

Citations

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