

SUCCESS WITH MY SHY MASTIFF

by Debbie Condon

I am hoping that by writing this, other Mastiff owners will be encouraged to work with their shy dogs. Shyness is a problem in some Mastiffs, and too often we "protect" the dog from people and situations that cause anxiety, and then reinforce the shyness, in a vicious circle.

BEFORE:

My Mastiff, Muffin, started out as a shy puppy when I bought her at 4 months old. I kept thinking she would outgrow her fear, but she didn't. She growled at any approaching stranger, any new friend who was invited into my home. She would run away at any strange noise or fearful situation, object or person. After her first heat at one year, she added surly behavior to her shyness. One day she growled at me when I disciplined her and I realized there was a real problem.

AFTER:

Four months later, Muffin's progress: Muffin now has an outgoing personality. We placed 1st in our beginning obedience course, over about 10 dogs. Muffin laid still during the noisy tattooing procedure (when some dogs panicked). We have shown in subnovice and novice obedience at matches. She stands steady and shows no apprehension during the stand for exam by a strange judge. We have also shown in conformation at AKC shows (where the judge goes over the dog thoroughly) with Muffin standing steady. At a match recently, we won a Best of Breed and placed second in Working Group.

THE PROCESS:

I contacted a local Mastiff breeder who recommended that I go to an obedience class. Jeanne Cook (a Mastiff owner) was teaching a beginning class, and told me to drop by with Muffin so she could evaluate the situation. She watched Muffin and me, and told me two things I could do. The first thing was to enroll in a beginning obedience class to give Muffin (and myself) more confidence. The second thing was to get out and socialize Muffin to strange people and unusual situations. We did both these things, with good results. What a relief it is to have a dog that behaves. We were given information and step by step instructions on how to train and socialize. This was important for me because I just didn't know how to begin.

Muffin learned basic obedience commands, and we practiced them every day, often in parks, malls and supermarkets. I enforced discipline to get her attention by placing her on a "sit stay". Strangers came by and fed her a treat. If she stayed where she was, and didn't growl, she got liver. If she growled or moved, she got a loud "NO" and a jerk on her collar. This method was practiced outside of supermarkets and post offices; as heavy traffic areas are best.

The "sit stay" also worked with other fearful situations, such as firecrackers, trash cans, sprinklers, the vet's office, etc. We practiced on them all. We kept going by the fearful object or place or person, until she no longer tried to run away or growl. Lots of praise and liver were given when she did not

show fear, or when her fear was less that the last time she was in a particular situation. After a few months, Muffin began to realize that strangers and new places or odd noises were not going to hurt her. And we both began to relax and started to have fun. So we turned the situation from a shy "Who's going to harm me?" to "Let's see who is going to give me some liver and praise."

Several things that I learned on my first Mastiff are:

1. Socialize your puppy/dog as soon as you can. Don't put it off thinking it will get better. It won't improve unless you do something about it.
2. Enroll in an obedience class with a knowledgeable instructor. This will help build both you and your dog's confidence (you both probably need it). It will also give you information and "how-to's" on training your dog.
3. Stick to it. Don't give up after the first or second lesson if she isn't perfectly "cured". Don't give up after a lesson has gone poorly. You need to have more staying power than your dog. It is worth the effort, and you can help your dog to change.
4. Talk to other dog people about difficulties you may be having. You may find a workable solution from someone else who has had the same problem.

Perhaps the nicest thing that people have been saying is "I can't believe that this is the same dog you brought in here months ago. What a difference! SHYNESS CAN BE OVERCOME.

Congratulations to Debbie and Muffin! Muffin earned her C.D. obedience title!