

Biting back

An autistic son's constant pestering of the family dogs was resulting in growls - and even bites. Urgent intervention was needed...

Mark, Jan and their seven-year-old son, James, joined our puppy classes with Scud, a 16-week-old Sarloos-Northern Inuit. Sarloos are wolf hybrids, achieved originally by crossing a German Shepherd Dog with a female European Wolf. The Northern Inuit originated in the late 1980s, in an attempt to create a domestic wolf-lookalike dog breed.

Within a couple of weeks, Mark told me that their other dog, Jesse, a Northern Inuit, had bitten their other son, 11-year-old Blake, causing a scrape on his face. Blake, who has autism, had been pestering her.

Life was a difficult balancing act for them, committed as they are to both their dogs and their children.

I explained that Jesse would repeat the bite, possibly at a more severe level, if Blake continued to pester her. The aggression level, equivalent in human terms to a push or a shove, was Jesse's way of saying clearly, "Blake! Go away!"

We discussed managing her behaviour, using a muzzle, but also protecting her from Blake's unpredictable behaviour.

As Scud continued through classes, they told me that Blake was now totally ignoring Jesse and they were never leaving him alone with Jesse or Scud.

In classes, Scud responded well to reward-based training methods, including the clicker, focusing mostly on Mark. The family finished the six sessions and left, happy with Scud's early socialisation and training. A super bond seemed to be developing between Mark and Scud.

Eight months later, Mark called to tell me that Scud was displaying increasingly aggressive behaviour towards Blake. Scud sometimes growled when Blake was simply nearby, but he always



Photo posed by models

growled if Blake gave direct eye contact, approached or touched Scud roughly. Blake was very persistent and unpredictable with Scud. On most occasions, Scud's response had been a low warning growl, but Scud had recently bitten, bruising Blake's arm.

We only take behaviour cases through veterinary referral, so that any contributory clinical factor can be ruled out. With the referral agreed, a consultation was arranged so that Alan, Blake's community nurse, could be present too.

This was going to be particularly interesting for me, because I also teach deaf students and those with additional learning difficulties. The positive, reward-based motivational approaches to behaviour management that we use with young people are, thankfully, increasingly being used with animals. They are much more effective and the whole process is calmer and more pleasant.

Animals are emotional beings, too, and so, happily for me and for the animals, we have moved away from aversive punishment strategies. These can occasionally change

behaviour but unpleasant punishments do not change attitudes in children and usually worsen aggression in dogs. Only positive reinforcement strategies produce long-term attitudinal and behavioural changes. With both dogs and children, we wish them to behave appropriately because they want to, not because they are forced to.

Sound bites

On arrival at their home, I was greeted in a non-aggressive but curious manner by both dogs. It was delightful to see Scud again. He had matured into a large, fine young adult, diving straight to see what treats my bag held! Jesse was friendly and then spent most of the two hours calmly settled by Mark's chair.

Scud, muzzled, was generally relaxed but responded to Blake's approaches with a low growl. It became clear that Blake's unpredictable behaviour was directed at trying to make Scud growl because Blake was rewarded by that sound. Blake's focus was on lights, sounds and movements. At one point, Blake suddenly grabbed Scud's nose through the muzzle, this again eliciting the growl. With Blake

removed, both dogs returned to calm.

James's relationship with the dogs was good, while both dogs were fine with visitors.

Scud's general behaviour is typical of the Sarloos. He is strongwilled, curious, shy of unknown people and dislikes being left. Generally, Sarloos do not give a strong warning before biting. Blake's behaviour towards Scud was most provocative, ignoring all the dog's warnings. Scud was showing enormous restraint and bite inhibition - for now.

However, if Scud's warnings continued to be ignored, the next step would be a more severe bite. Scud was not yet an adult and his confidence to object, by biting Blake should the pestering continue, would increase with maturity. Unless Blake's behaviour changed towards Scud, he really should be separated from him.

With plenty of exercise, good food and mental stimulation, the general mood state of both dogs was good. Scud found Blake unpredictable and, even before the growl, his body language showed concern: his eyes widened, his jaw set and he

stiffened. The growling strategy was reinforced because Blake was removed by Mark or Jan. Unfortunately, the layout of the house meant Blake often had to pass Scud. Without a growl, Blake was more likely to ignore Scud. If we could prevent a sound from Scud, Blake should lose interest.

We prioritised safety. For the time being, both dogs were to be muzzled in the presence of children. While Jesse was not now displaying aggression towards Blake, she may become Blake's target again as the work with Scud progressed. I explained that if the dogs were pestered while muzzled, they would feel more threatened and this would worsen the situation. They were not to be alone with children.

Good behaviour

Alan and I came up with a programme for Scud and Blake. Alan was to create a storyboard for Blake to help alter Blake's behaviour away from targeting and handling the dogs roughly. Blake was not to approach the dogs while they were resting. Scud had been clicker trained in class, with the click acting as a marker for a wanted behaviour and a signal of an impending reward. Jesse was also introduced to the clicker.

Blake adored the sound, so he had a set of click/reward games to play with the dogs while Mark or Jan delivered the treats. Blake was discouraged from touching the dogs. However, if he did stroke Jesse or Scud, he was praised for "Good stroking". When Blake was present, Mark would treat and calmly praise non-aggressive responses from Scud to try to desensitise him to Blake's presence. No one was to hug, cuddle or pat the dogs in front of Blake, there were to be only strokes.

After a couple of weeks, Alan and I went back. Scud occasionally growled if Blake was near, but it had decreased.

Scud was beginning to look back to Mark for rewards instead. We worked on being calm. Blake was included in feeding the dogs and allowed to use the clicker for the specific activities, which he thoroughly enjoyed. Alan gave the family more distraction strategies to use with Blake.

With a structured intervention programme for both Scud and Blake delivered consistently, I hoped for a good resolution.

A few months on, there have been occasional growls from Scud, but the good relationship between Mark and Scud has enabled these to be much reduced. Blake has virtually lost interest, his reward being via the clicker games. As a result, Scud finds Blake's presence more predictable and even rewarding.

This situation would have been much worse if handled badly by the owners. Any punishment of Scud, through use of aversive techniques, would have increased Scud's fear of Blake, triggering harder bites.

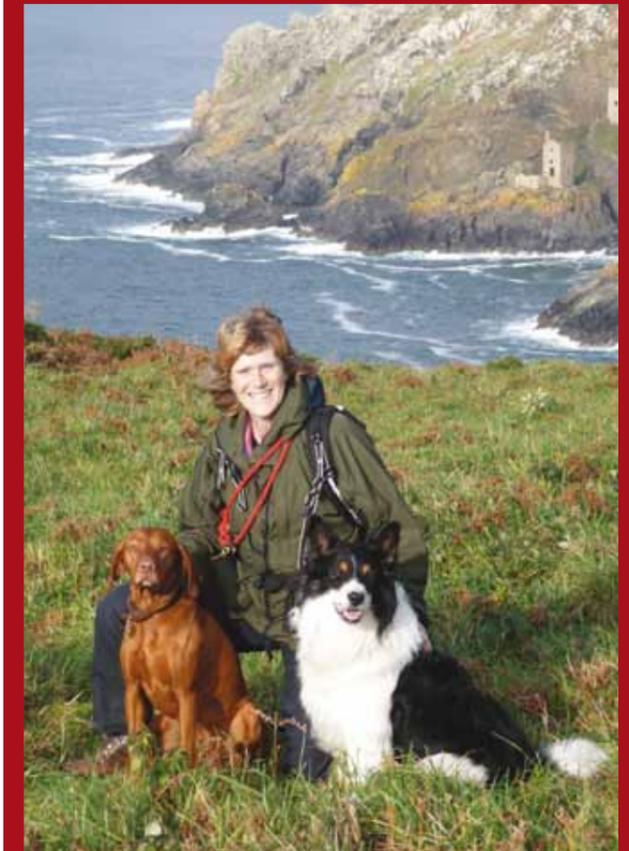
While it is a huge step forward that Scud is now only intermittently growling at Blake, the early learning process he went through with the child does leave a doubt in everyone's mind. It would be ideal if Scud stopped growling altogether. Given his breed, his early experiences with Blake, and the fact that there is still the occasional growl, the parents, the community nurse and myself are aware that it may be better for Scud to move to another home, especially as he matures. This would remove considerable stress from Blake's parents, as they have to be constantly vigilant around the two, which inevitably increases Scud's stress. Monitoring every waking minute for the foreseeable future is unrealistic. Scud would be able to relax more and maintain his 'resting contentment' at a more constant balance in a new home. ■



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She is a member of the Pet Matters behaviour and training team in south-west Devon and is also a very experienced teacher of the deaf. She completed her COAPE Advanced Diploma in 2007, is a member of CAPBT and also a member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT 1015).

Chrissy has been involved with dogs all her life, mostly herding breeds, but also gundogs and those with a mixed background.



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