



Behaviorist Dale McLelland on Working with Troubled Dogs



Scottish behaviour expert Dale McLelland with one of her rescue Rottweilers named Theo. She rescued him from an abusive situation and helped him overcome his fear issues. He went on to become one of her training partners and a true gentle giant.

► What piqued your interest initially about working with troubled dogs?

It wasn't a conscious decision, it just seemed to grow from the desire to understand more about dogs and why their behaviors may be different from what we expect or from what we would consider to be the norm. Before I see them, many of the dogs I work with have been through the usual routes: training classes and using various methods and approaches without success. I always wanted to know

what the dog really needed instead of trying to find a magic formula or new method that would “work.” The answer is often right in front of us—the dog is always telling us something, we simply need to be much better at listening. The more dogs I saw and worked with, the more questions I had and the more I needed to learn. After all, we have a duty of care and must look for ways to support dogs when they are clearly struggling.

► Are you seeing a sharp increase in your practice of more and more troubled dogs? If yes, what are the most common behavior concerns you are seeing?

Most of the dogs I saw previously were sensitive dogs that found what we consider to be everyday life to be a challenge. That is still the case, and there are more requests for help than ever before. That may be down to several factors ranging from greater awareness about seeking help, to the greater pressures of life and, of course, greater expectations of appropriate dog behavior. Dogs struggling with novelty is a huge issue, which may be meeting or seeing new dogs, new people, or being put into new situations with which they have no experience to compare. I would say that an increasing trend seems to be more guardians and family members being bitten by their own dogs. That brings with it additional stresses and emotional trauma.

► **What in your professional experience are some of the most pressing causes of modern-day stress in dogs?**

A. It's so hard to pinpoint. Many factors and variables contribute to stress and trauma in domestic dogs. Living with humans in a human-orientated world isn't always easy. Additionally, there is a greater number of dogs in the population than ever before. The relative ease with which a dog can be purchased, the fact that many start their lives in less-than-ideal situations, the increased stress of owners, and owners' unrealistically high expectations but low understanding of canine behavior all combine to create a life for dogs that can be challenging. Dogs are not perfect little individuals—they do dog things—and their stresses must be unbearable at times. It seems an obvious thing to state that dogs need to be able to simply be dogs but sadly, it does need repeating.

► **What are the top three things you advise owners to do when they finally understand that they are living with a troubled dog, especially a reactive dog?**

There is enormous pressure on guardians to have the perfect dog and realizing that your dog might not fit that picture can cause stress, anxiety, and embarrassment. We know that dogs are often seen as extensions of ourselves, and a dog that bites, fights, or lunges is not the image that any responsible guardian would want to portray; this can lead to even more pressure to “do something about it.”

My top three pieces of advice would be:

1. Accept that this does not mean that there is something wrong with your dog and instead look objectively at the situation.
2. Avoid apportioning blame. The behavior is generally not anyone's fault; it is what it is, and the dog is providing you with important information.
3. Recognize that allowances will have to be made. Large-scale change can feel overwhelming, but smaller steps can lead to much better outcomes.

► **The dog training industry is currently evolving at a fast pace and new ideas about training are being considered all over the world. What changes are you seeing? Do you have some favorite new ways to help troubled dogs?**

We are seeing the shift from a traditional model to a more holistic view of dog behavior—nothing happens in isolation after all. So many events and factors contribute to the way a dog may behave in any given situation that only looking at the observable behavior can give a blinkered view of the situation. Simply attempting to change that observable behavior to a more “desirable” one is solely solution-focused and based on partial information. We know that the dog is experiencing the world, interactions, and training methods. These things will generate an emotional reaction; the behavior that we see is not always an indicator of the internal experience of the dog in question. I may smile in response to a question being asked, but that doesn't mean I feel happy. It's important to consider how this situation feels for the dog: are they coping, are they being forced into using certain behaviors to deal with the unknown, and can we help them feel less threatened?

In general, dog training approaches can be too quick to jump in with activities and solutions—dogs need time to process information. If we are constantly interrupting this normal brain activity, we can inflame situations rather than diffusing them. I am a great believer in allowing dogs the time they need to process information, not marking and treating (which can be useful in some situations), but simply enabling them to build up a mental picture of the world in complete safety.



Sometimes what a dog needs most is just time and a safe space from which they can process and learn about the world around them.



Behaviorist Dale McLelland Shares How She Helped a Once-Troubled Dog Learn to Trust People Again



Scottish Behaviorist and Canine Expert Dale McLelland taking an afternoon break with her beloved Old English Sheepdogs. We encourage letting dogs be dogs, and that includes getting in plenty of downtime throughout the day.

► **Introduce us to Mr. McBitey. aka Pezz. I have thoughts on his name, but how did he get it?**

Pezz is a 6-year-old male Bedlington Terrier, but we fondly refer to him as Mr. McBitey! It is a nickname given with affection, though. He had lived with the same family for most of his life until a family illness meant that the hard decision had to be taken to try and find him a new home. It was a tough time for the family, and Mr. McBitey is a sensitive boy, so I have no doubt he was struggling to cope with the emotional turmoil too.

► **What behavior concerns brought Mr. McBitey's owners to see you?**

He was taken under the care of the Bedlington Terrier Rescue Foundation,¹ a responsible and dog-centered rescue, which asked if I would be prepared to offer him a foster place. I had met him before as he had spent a couple of weeks here in a boarding capacity, so it was the best possible outcome for him. The reported behaviors were “unpredictable biting or charging” mostly at his guardians and seemingly without warning or for any real reason (as far as they could tell). This “unpredictability” made living with him quite difficult, and they felt that they were treading on eggshells around him. He also had significant skin issues and what appeared to be an unusual gait. While this had been investigated, the causes were never fully identified.

¹ See <http://www.bedlingtonrescue.co.uk>.

► **What were the first steps you implemented for him?**

We can never underestimate the time it takes for dogs to adjust from a major change in their lives, even when we truly believe it's a change for the better. Trauma comes in many forms, and dogs that have experienced emotional and physical health issues are not simply going to settle and de-stress after a few days of peace and quiet. Predictable routines were important as was the establishment of a safe and secure base. I endeavored to give him as much freedom to choose when to go outside and where to sleep and I absolutely established a hands-off approach.

Most importantly, I didn't use any form of bribery, such as food, to get him to engage with me. I wanted to be sure that it was his choice entirely. Trust is not transferable; we have to earn this with every dog that we work with while using close observation skills to understand the range of his responses and meet his needs. There were some obvious flash points, such as reaching toward him while he was resting. Others seemed less obvious but understanding the early signs of his worry or discomfort meant that these could be noted and avoided. The majority of the time, he appeared fairly content but never fully relaxed and was pretty food obsessed. At that time, the best description of him would have been "intense."

► **What does a typical day under your care look like for Mr. McBitey?**

We live in the countryside, so things are quiet here. He has his own space to retreat to and he generally isn't a "morning person," so I have to give him time to wake up gradually. He likes his breakfast before venturing out, which he is always reluctant to do if it's raining! We go for wanders in my paddock, where he can sniff and explore and will often meet a variety of dogs who come here for boarding and daycare. He engages with them all and will have short periods of play if he feels like it!

We avoid any kind of training activities that involve food rewards as he becomes fixated; this food fixation stops him



Mr. McBitey—also known as Pezz—has become a lovely housemate after receiving professional care from Behaviorist Dale McLelland

from being able to make those choices to disengage when he isn't comfortable. He enjoys his free work sessions and walks across the fields with my dogs. It's a pretty good life for him, I believe.

He also has to have regular baths and treatments for his skin condition, which he doesn't love, but he is much more comfortable with handling and touch now, so I get the impression that he accepts it, content in the knowledge that he can choose to walk away if he needs to. This is so important because his tendency to air snap or bite was due to a lack of choice and feeling restrained. He isn't a particularly cuddly boy but does enjoy leaning against me while he has a massage; he is very definite in his requests for these too.

► **What other professionals helped this dog along his journey?**

As he had a number of health issues that had to be addressed, I relied heavily on Janice Macleod, who is a veterinary nurse, to help find appropriate treatments for his uncomfortable and painful conditions. Janice and the vets were incredible in their knowledge and expertise and their approach to working with a sensitive dog. The rescue arranged for a special diet to be formulated for him and continued to provide support.

During the early months of his stay, I undertook an online ACE Free Work course with Sarah Fisher and Pezz was my co-learner. We didn't know how much he could be involved and didn't want to put him under pressure in any way, but he completed the course activities with me, and we had fabulous support from Sarah and Lucie Leclerc. One of the unintended benefits was collecting a catalog of video footage of these sessions, which is invaluable in gaining more insight into sometimes-subtle changes in body language. It also provides me with a clear record of his progress.

► **How is Mr. McBitey doing today? What are his biggest improvements and accomplishments?**

He is doing really well! I should say that his pet name of McBitey, isn't actually justified anymore—he is a clear communicator and while he does start to worry at times, he now has the skills and experience to remove himself from the situation rather than freezing and snapping (his prior responses). The biggest achievements are too many to list; it's his ability to make choices that never ceases to amaze. In the early days, he growled when his collar was put on—he had to be distracted by food, he stiffened and braced himself when he was touched, his posture was tight and hunched, but now he can meet new people without too much tension and knows that he can disengage at any time.

Many of the more obscure “triggers” simply disappeared once he relaxed and learned a new approach. Life is so much easier now that I can show him his collar and he trots right over to have it put on—no need for bribing, no tension, just a positive association for something that once worried him greatly.

For him, I would say that his biggest achievement is being able to exercise choice. He feels safe, I am sure of that, and his life has opened up vastly; new experiences are no longer worrying, and I hope that he sees me as his secure base throughout.