



British Behaviorist Mark Bridger-Pescott Explains Why Labeling Dogs' Behavior as Troubled Creates Problems for Owners



Trainer and Behaviorist Mark Bridger-Pescott ensures his rescue dogs Ava and Bear receive daily walks and enrichment. This walk is at local spot, Climping Beach in West Sussex.

► **What first drew you toward working with troubled dogs?**

I've always had a dog around me for my whole life; my first dog was a mixed breed, when I was around 8 years of age, and he was my very best friend. I started to help a German Shepherd rescue in my teens by doing home-checks, walking, collecting, etc., so I saw first-hand what rescue dogs were going through. That experience broke my heart, and I knew I wanted to try and help as many dogs stay with good families as possible. This experience started my journey toward dog training and behavior. I currently help several rescues by offering discounts, webinars (to help raise funds), and giving more up-to-date advice, based on the latest scientific findings, on how to deal with dogs.

I don't see a "troubled dog," I see a "dog"—an entity, a personality, a living being with emotions. When I am called to go and help a person with their dog, I'm looking to see how I can help repair their relationship while helping the dog overcome whatever it is that is making both the dog and guardian unhappy. In a lot of cases, once you repair the relationship, the behaviors improve too.

► **What are the most common troubling canine behaviors you are seeing in these modern times?**

I don't see "troubling canine behaviors," I see troubling responses to those behaviors. Dogs only do "dog things," and the main issue with that is that humans don't like some dog things (behaviors). I see that as a human issue and not a dog issue. If we can understand what the dog needs, then we can help them to behave in ways we do like. We tend to think the dog is being "naughty" or doing things on purpose, so we tend to respond in a negative way to what we (as guardians) perceive as being a negative behavior. This usually only serves to make the behavior worse and damage the relationship further.

The most disturbing issue for me is when people tell the dog off for growling—they take it personally. I explain that a growl is a wonderful noise, as it is an extremely clear indication that the dog is not happy and that we need to

back away. If we do back away, we can teach the dog that we are able to listen to them and act accordingly, which in turn will build trust. (We obviously need to work on why the dog has growled, so we can avoid this situation in the first place, though.)

► **What do you wish owners knew about working with a troubled dog that they might not know?**

Most people will not actively choose to take on a dog that has behavioral issues, but they may take on a dog that develops issues at some point. These can arise for several reasons, including past experiences, genetics, or even just the fact that their entire world has just changed. This could be a puppy, a rescue dog, or a dog that someone can no longer look after who needs to be rehomed.

The first thing I urge people to do is to research the particular breed of dog they are getting—is that breed the right fit for them? And, equally importantly, are they the right fit for the dog? If they are the sort of people who like to relax in the evenings and weekends watching films, then don't get a Collie or Springer Spaniel, for example.

The second thing I ask people to do is to learn about the basic body language of their dog—learn to understand what they are trying to tell you and how to respond in the right way. It's important to understand the dog's basic needs first, and then build on that so they can help the dog become a well-rounded member of the family.

► **What are the top three things troubled dogs need from their owners to begin to unravel their stressed or anxiety-ridden behaviors?**

First, employing the services of a qualified, modern, science-based behaviorist is a must. Get the right treatment plan for your individual dog and follow that advice. Providing the following three pieces to the dog will be necessary no matter what.

Understanding—for anyone, being understood and listened to is extremely important, as it helps us to feel as though we can effectively communicate how we feel. When we know



Before we can help any dog, we must build up their trust in us.

we're understood, we no longer feel the need to escalate our behavior. Imagine trying to explain to an animal that you are not well, or that you're in pain. How frustrated would you become if you couldn't explain how you felt to another species because they didn't understand you? And then how would you feel if that animal thought your actions were negative and reacted to you negatively in response? You would either just have to be quiet, shut down, and put up with it, or increase your behaviors to try and explain harder—neither are good outcomes!

Compassion—if we have compassion for our dogs and understand that they may be having a hard time (and

aren't intentionally giving us a hard time), then it becomes easier for us to help them. They will be behaving due to a perceived problem in their world, so we need to understand that to help them overcome it.

Time—any issue, especially anxiety or stress-related issues, will take time to overcome, just as with humans. We have to work on the emotions behind the behavior first so that the dog is better equipped to cope in the first place, then they can improve.

► **Are you optimistic or pessimistic for the future happiness of pet dogs?**

I have to be optimistic, we all do, as it helps to drive us forward to spread the new modern ways of dealing with dogs that don't involve pain, force, or fear.

Slowly, the outdated ways will fade and there are so many new, young behaviorists coming through that have learned and continue to learn the right way of doing things. There are, of course, still organizations promoting the outdated ways and I fear they will always be around, but they are rapidly becoming the minority.

It's looking good for dogs as people are starting to see the benefits of treating dogs with kindness and respect; they are starting to ask questions regarding trainers and behaviorists and their methods and not just accepting that "this is how things are done." In some cases, this leads to the behaviorist looking into alternative methods, too. Furthermore, owners are also looking more into the food they feed their dogs, rather than just accepting that dog food is dog food. They are seeing the benefits of good quality food on the dog's behavior and health and seeing the link between nutrition and the "internal and external condition."

All in all, things are looking up for dog welfare in general as far as I'm concerned.