



The flea story – Sarah in the garden

Sarah is lying on a blanket drawing in her colouring book while Blue is running in the garden. As Blue runs past her, Sarah reaches out her hand to pet him. Blue, however, does not stop and keeps on running around. Sarah leaves her blanket and starts to follow him, but Blue is not happy to be chased, and hides under the garden table. Sarah is not aware of Blue's feelings at this time and wants to get close to him. Oh!... now Blue turns around and growls at Sarah.

Why is Blue growling?

Blue is running around and is quite excited. He does not feel like being petted by Sarah today. It might be because he feels itchy, but in fact, there does not need to be an obvious reason. He may just be having a bad day. He tries to show Sarah his feelings by hiding under the table, seeming to say "I do not want to be chased today". Sadly, Sarah does not realise this and thinks Blue is inviting her to join him under the table. As she approaches, Blue makes his feelings clear by growling, as if to stress "please leave me alone, will you?"

How to prevent this situation?

Children – In daily life, children need to cope with frustration. Adults or playmates may not always want to act in the way the child wishes. Likewise, children must learn that the dog may not always want to be petted at every moment. If children do not appreciate this they might not understand why the dog might suddenly want to hide under a table and avoid being stroked.

Parents – One option is to develop role-play games with the child using a stuffed animal in place of the dog. In this way the child can learn valuable lessons without the risk of being bitten. Place the stuffed toy under the table and explain to the child he wants to be on its own and not be petted. Reward the child for a right response.

Similarly, parents can engage in play involving the child and the family dog. One could encourage the child to leave the dog alone when he hides in a corner by recognising the situation and saying something like: “Let’s give him some peace, he wants to have a quiet moment when he’s in that corner – so let us (child and parent) play together”. Children learn by imitation, so the parents’ attitude towards the dog is crucial at all times.

Dog – Dogs need a special place where they can retreat and feel safe. Normal family life situations have many variables (inside the house or in the garden; actions initiated by the dog or the child) and so in reality it may be rather difficult to anticipate every potential risk. For this reason, it is beneficial if parents try to recognise the early signals from the dog that indicate he wants some quiet time away from the rough and tumble of the children.

What about your dog?

Learn the stress signals shown by your dog. Behavioural signs like yawning, licking the lips, turning the head away or suddenly scratching may indicate your dog feels stressed or even threatened. When you observe these signs, it is important that you resolve the problem by encouraging him to go to his “safe area” and then rewarding him for the choice.