



The flea story – Sarah in the sandpit

Sarah is building a castle in the sandpit. Blue is interested and comes to see what she is doing. He sits besides the sandpit and Sarah starts to stroke him. At first he enjoys being petted, closing his eyes with pleasure. But suddenly he starts growling. Sarah ignores the growls and continues to stroke Blue gently...until Oh dear! Blue turns towards her, barks and snaps! Now Sarah has understood and stops petting Blue.

Why is Blue Snapping?

The fleas on Blue's skin make him feel itchy and bad tempered. Although he normally likes Sarah petting him, today he feels irritable and doesn't want to be touched and stroked as usual. He growls as a warning, as if to say "I'm not happy – leave me alone!"

How to prevent this situation?

Children – Children might not necessarily understand what their pet is trying to say when he growls or snaps. However, these are always serious warnings. So how can we help them understand? Children learn from experience what happens when adults or playmates are cross. Similarly, we need to teach children that any dog – even their own loving pet – can have a bad mood. This may be when he is ill or in pain or just very tired.

Parents – A good start is to spend time with your child observing your pet and talking through how you think he feels at this time. For example, the dog might be limping because he has a painful paw, and so he may not want to be cuddled. A story about your child's real experience may be of help to illustrate this – such as “do you remember how you felt when you had hurt your knee last week... You didn't want anybody to touch you or cuddle you then!”

It has been shown that young children look only at the dog's face and so miss a lot of information that may be obvious to adults. They are also unable to tell the dog's mood from his facial expression, so might easily confuse a happy with a scared face. So it is essential to teach children about their dog.

Dog – When dogs and children share the same household, it is wise to create resting places where the dog can relax and hide from the little child's hands and hugs. This might simply be the basket or an indoor kennel. It is important, however, to teach the dog that this resting place is safe, and it is very important to encourage the child to leave the dog alone when he is lying there. For the dog, a resting place should never be associated with punishment; on the contrary it should be an oasis of peace.

What about your dog?

Pain and discomfort associated with any disease is likely to make him more irritable. Observing how your dog behaves at times when he is not feeling quite right, might therefore be a useful exercise. How does your dog react when his ear is hurting or if he has been injured or perhaps undergone routine surgery? Observing your dog can clarify whether the usual threshold of his reactions has changed. Children themselves cannot judge these situations and might react normally towards the dog.