

'Just Wants To Play'

These words can send a shiver down my spine when I hear a dog owner shout this out as their dog is rushing towards another dog.

I was walking in our local park with a client and her dog. The dog was recovering from anxiety attacks when away from home. We had made huge progress and were now doing our first walk in the park. Needless to say I had my eyes peeled for loose dogs and scary people.

As we moved into another part of the park I spotted an elderly gentleman and his equally elderly Border Terrier, on lead, walking on the path ahead of us, moving in the same direction. I also saw a woman and her black Labrador, off lead, walking towards us. When the Labrador spotted the terrier it broke into a run and headed straight for the terrier. The elderly gentleman started to manoeuvre himself between the Labrador and his dog. 'It's alright, he just wants to play' came the cry from the lady owner. 'Well, mine doesn't', came the reply. I started to move forward as to me the Labrador, with its head down and hackles up, didn't look as if it wanted to play. Before I could get there to help, the Labrador bowled into the Terrier just behind the ribcage. The Terrier just fell over on its side and lay there. I arrived in time to drag the Labrador away and return it to its owner, suggesting politely that perhaps she should have it on a lead. The Terrier was still lying there. It eventually struggled up and I suggested to its owner that he took it to the vet for a check over.

I continued my walk with my client and went home. Three days later I had a phone call from my vet saying that they had a client who had an elderly Border Terrier who had become frightened of going out. I put two and two together and came up with four. The terrier, Bob, had been so traumatised that it no longer wanted to go out. Bob, I discovered, had very little sight left and was deaf. The arrival of the Labrador had been a complete and utter surprise to him.

When I arrived for the consultation I was given a warm welcome by Bob and his owner, David. David lived in a ground floor flat with a small garden and it was important that Bob had his daily little walks in the nearby park. Bob is 14 years old. I asked David to get Bob's lead out and this had an immediate effect on Bob who retreated to the bedroom and under the bed. He was shaking and quite distressed. He was still happy to go out into the garden but it was only a postage stamp.

As a member of the CAPBT, I was fully armed with how to use the EMRA approach of working with a dog's emotions. Working with an older dog it is important to realise that their cognitive abilities may not be as sharp as a younger dog and therefore it is more difficult to turn Bob's new fear of being outside back into something he enjoyed. Also the park is well used by dog owners and there are a lot of dogs that run free. Add to this his limited sight and no hearing I had to think a little bit outside the box in order to get Bob interested in going out again. My first suggestion was to buy a new lead of a different fabric and feel, and noise.

Fortunately I have a friend with a very friendly female Border Terrier, not quite as old as Bob but mature at a mere 8 years of age. Bob gets on well with dogs and when David's family visit him they bring their dogs with them I felt it was worth a try to see if having another dog around would help restore Bob's confidence. David agreed and he really wanted his friend back with him enjoying his walks. Our first plan was to ask David's daughter to visit with her dog. This worked really well with Bob having a good sniff and realising who it was. Then Amanda took her dog outside and we met up

with my friend Sue and her Border Terrier Mabel. Mabel and Amanda's dog got on well so we all walked back into the garden. Bob soon realised that there was a new dog in the garden and approached Mabel and had a sniff and was given a lovely food reward for doing that. Soon all three dogs were in the house and Bob was following Mabel around, as if to show her his home! Amanda had travelled some distance in order to help her father and she left first with her dog and after a short time Mabel, Sue and I left as well. Apparently Bob slept very well that night after all his socialising.

We continued with Sue and Mabel visiting David and Bob on a regular basis. Then I had to decide whether Bob was confident enough with Mabel to go with her just into the park. With help from colleagues we formed a semi circle of people just inside the park so they could make sure that no dog ran towards Bob and Mabel. Bob hesitated as he left the garden but we kept Mabel close to him and with the rewards handy we arrived at the park. Here he froze, he knew where he was. We just stopped and chatted and kept everything low key and kept Mabel with Bob. Once he relaxed a bit we turned and went back home.

It took several weeks of working like this until Bob and Mabel were regularly walking together in the park, as were David and Sue! It was time to widen Bob's circle of friends and very carefully we introduced him to my 'socialising group' of dogs. He was a bit unsure to start off with but with Mabel at his side he soon widened his group of friends. It was very useful working him in the group as he would be in the middle and any off lead dogs approaching would be deflected by one of the socialising group.

Then we started moving Mabel away from Bob during walks so that Bob was back on his own with David. Lots of treats reinforced the fact that he was safe. David now kept a very watchful eye on the dogs walking in the park. I suggested to David that he contacted the Yellow Dog UK group, which the CAPBT sponsors, and get one of their dog jackets that states 'I need space'. This has worked well and regulars in the park now know that Bob needs space and take care with their dogs if they are running free.

David and Bob are now back in the park on their regular walks. They have a lot more friends and people and dogs greet them both. I think the 'word' got out about what happened and when I see them I am also aware of an almost invisible safety net around them from other dog walkers in the park. David and Bob are now regulars in our socialising group and Bob and Mabel are great friends.

My message then would be to remind everyone that if their dog is off lead and is inclined to rush up to others, just think about the other dog. Not every dog can cope with this, especially when the dog rushing up is much bigger. Make sure if your dog is off lead that it will recall immediately. Don't use 'just wants to play' as an excuse to hide the fact that the dog is not under control.