

Combining Obedience & Aggression Phases

Dr. Stephen Mackenzie PhD.

Sometimes when we are forced to deal with a large number of details, we lose track of the overall concepts which govern them. I believe this may be happening to many of us in the obedience and aggression phases of K-9 training. In basic training, the two phases are often separated so that learning will occur faster. Many people continue this separation after basic school, probably out of habit. It is not unusual for training days to be split up into tracking (early in the morning), then obedience later, followed by aggression and control still later. While this may be a useful method during initial training, it certainly sends mixed signals to experienced dogs. It teaches the concept that obedience and aggression are separate items, which do not have to be performed together. This may suffice for some sport dogs, but as we all know, this is not reality for street dogs. On the street, there is no separation between phases - obedience and aggression must be performed at the same time. Unfortunately, the way we teach and maintain these phases encourages the dog to think that they are different skills with little connection to each other. It is simple to find dogs which will perform certification level obedience when they receive signals indicating that this is the "obedience phase", and yet cannot perform the same maneuvers correctly when they receive signals indicating that this is the "aggression phase". Many of these signals come from the handlers, some of which have different expectations of the dog depending upon which phase they are in. This separation of phases and the different expectations create confusion in the dog's mind and are clearly not the best we can do for them.

What is needed are training techniques and patterns which teach the concept that obedience and aggression are never separate skills, but always performed together. In other words, obedience is never out of session. That way the dog will always be responsive to obedience commands, but we can choose not to use them at times when we want the dog to focus on something other than the handler.

A good start is to have a decoy present during obedience training. If the handler continues to have the same expectations of the dog, this teaches it not to be a raving lunatic simply because a potential aggressor is present. This is better than nothing, but does not combine the two phases since no aggression is required during the sequence. Other units incorporate tactical obedience into their aggression phases. This is also a good start, but tactical obedience often does not reflect the entire spectrum of obedience. This again insinuates to the dog that only a portion of obedience is required in difficult situations. Hence the two phases are not completely merged.

A better approach would be to keep tactical obedience and also devise a set of routines where every maneuver in regular obedience is present in some combination with every maneuver in aggression. The two phases would have to be performed in the same set of routines. Training for such a combination would teach the dog that no separation exists between the two phases. This may be difficult to accomplish, but it encourages the type of thinking the dog needs on the street. Good obedience should not interfere with a good dog's focus on the suspect. If it does, you may want to check on the quality of your obedience training.

Combining the phases of obedience and aggression should lead to three things. 1) You should have much less trouble with aggression control, 2) your training should become more realistic, and 3) better voice control should allow you to stay under cover in bad situations. It's worth a try.

Stephen A. Mackenzie, Ph.D., is a professor of animal science at the State University of New York and a canine trainer for the Schoharie County (N.Y.) Sheriff's Department.