



Max case study

Max was bought via the internet from a family that had kept him in flat for the first 21 months of his life and he was only let into the yard which did not have any trees or grass. His new owners were told that he was a Belgian Shephard, but I think he's more of a collie cross, mixed with GSD. Maria and Paul also had another dog called Joey, a collie cross who is 13 years old.

I met Maria and Paul a couple of months after they had got Max and whilst they had done an extraordinary job with him they were still struggling with his behaviour outside the house. Max had never experienced traffic noise, other dogs on the street or even the sound of cars going through puddles. He was very reactive, lunging, barking and was very strong, which meant that sometimes Maria got caught by him and was bitten. Max showed a lot of puppy behaviour even though he was nearly 2 years old. Being in such a restricted environment as the flat and yard meant that Max wasn't able to learn and grow like a normal puppy, instead when Maria and Paul started to take him outside he was overwhelmed with so many new things that he regressed to the puppy stage. It's hard to get your head around that sometimes as he was fully grown by then.

Joey was good with Max, he would correct his behaviour, especially if Max was a bit boisterous, but sometimes he intervened too much and stopped Max being a dog. It is always important to allow each dog time on their own or with their owners. It can sometimes become quite competitive in the household with dogs vying for individual attention. Joey & Max are separated for 4 hours most days, which gives the dog's time to relax. When they don't have this time on their own, Maria has noticed that they start winding each other up. Joey is also getting on; he is the equivalent of around 80 years old in human years, so having a young adolescent around is quite tiring for him.

Maria and Paul would take Max & Joey for an early morning run whilst they were on their bikes, this was great for wearing him out, but he wasn't able to be a dog. Part of the initial assessment was to take Max out for a walk so I could look at what the owners were doing and also how Max was behaving. We went to a smaller park that is not frequented by a lot of other dogs and this was perfect for allowing Max to start behaving like a dog. He was encouraged to go to the sides of the park and have a good sniff, this not only stimulated him, but he absolutely loved having a bit of controlled freedom.

Back in the house I suggested some changes when feeding Max. The food was always left on the floor and he wasn't excited when it was initially put down. I suggested if Max didn't eat the food straight away then pick it up and try again a bit later, if the same thing happens, pick it up and then put it back down again that evening/morning. I also looked at where Max slept and as he was quite an anxious boy we spoke about making a den for him, somewhere he could always go and feel safe.

This was the amazing email I received the day after the assessment:

“We took max back to the park last night and walked around for a bit. After a while, I put him on the retractable lead so that he could go under the trees and sniff with Joey. Oh my goodness, he loved it! The tail went right up and then curled at the top. I was worried that the lead might not be strong enough so we put him back on the short lead for the walk home next to the road.

Getting home, he was a complete different dog. He was completely content and sleeping on the floor. Normally he is tucked under my arm or on my lap. We can now leave the room and he didn't follow us. At one point I was a little worried that maybe he was getting sick or something.

Joey has calmed down completely as well as he does not have to be on guard so much anymore.

I placed a large duvet cover over the table for Max's den and he slept really well last night. Again, he came out the room very calm and relaxed.

I picked up the food last night and only gave it to him after the run. He loved it! Again, I can see a complete change in behaviour for him. Usually he wants constant attention and jumping up but this morning he finished his food after the run, I picked up the bowls and he went straight to bed again. Completely knocked out again. I started printing some work for today and he didn't even follow me or try and react to the noise of the printer.

The biggest change is that I don't feel scared of him anymore. I think my confidence was knocked when he bit me and I was worried that he might be an aggressive dog and that we would not be able to work with him. I think I forgot that it's only been 2 months and he's not doing too bad considering the massive change in environment for all of us.”

Maria and Paul have made fantastic progress with Max ever since, he is still reactive on the lead, but we are working on it and we have been able to successfully introduce Max to 4 other dogs in a controlled environment and muzzled when necessary. It is my belief that Max is not an aggressive dog he is just frustrated that he can't get to the other dog when he's on his lead and we are hoping that the more socialisation we can do the more he will improve on the lead. There's still quite a bit of work with recall and Paul has started to replace the ball and flinger with sniffing and being a dog, but wow what a different lovable dog Max has become. A lot of people may have given up with him as the early days were very stressful, but Paul and Maria have persevered and become more confident about handling Max.

We also used the yellow dog tabard that has in big black writing “my dog needs space” on it, it helped with Maria's confidence, but there were still some owners that allowed their dog to come near Max, making the situation really stressful, but this is not worn anymore, another huge milestone.

NB:

When I checked with Maria and Paul about the content for this case study they also reminded me about what they had tried before I came along:

“We watched all the Ceaser Milan episodes and were determined to be the alpha person and assert ourselves with Max. I truly believe that this did more damage with Max at the beginning as it made him more scared and therefore more reactive. It's only when we started with positive training that we started seeing the progress. The shouty, angry, growly approach just aggravated the whole situation and made him more anxious”

