

## Defense Training in the Young Prospect

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Many people interested in protection training or protection sports are confused about how to begin protection training for their young prospects. They wonder, "should I train right away in prey drive, or defense drive?" The answer to this question is often hotly debated, with some arguing that only prey drive should be worked in young dogs, and to leave defense training for when the dog is much more mature. There is some truth to this idea, that defense training is certainly stressful for the young dog, and it is easy to push him into avoidance if the stress is brought too high. Young dogs have a lower threshold for avoidance.

In my opinion, however, asking which drive to train first actually depends on the temperament of the dog in question. Prey training is much easier to do properly, and rarely results in pushing the dog into avoidance. In order to do defense training properly, the training helper (decoy, agitator) must have an excellent fundamental understanding of drives. (see my article Protection Skills: Preliminaries for an explanation of drives and their manifestations). To me, the most critical concept in protection training is the concept of channeling. Channeling is the process by which we develop the interaction of prey and defense drives, and teach the dog to comfortably shift from one drive to the other. Defense drive produces stress, and too much stress can result in avoidance. Prey drive is a calming, confidence building drive - the dog feels strong and in control. Yet defense training is essential. It provides the power and violence necessary for a dog to successfully fight a man. The hardness of the grip, the focus on the decoy, the all-around power in the work comes from defense that is built and channeled properly. Our goal is to develop a threshold for avoidance that is so high, nothing the dog ever sees on the protection field or on the street will push it into avoidance.

Our goal then is to raise the threshold for avoidance. How do we accomplish this? We must work the dog in defense and show the dog when he is pressed with threat, his proper response should be to meet this threat with aggression, and he will surely win. Can we do this with a young dog? Yes, but it must be done properly and with care. In my experience, some young dogs display defense at a very early age. If your breeder has carefully done his job, you are starting with a social, confident young dog. If your dog is not social and confident around people in normal circumstances, your young dog or puppy will have an extremely low threshold for avoidance, and any threat made could push him into avoidance. You cannot work a drive that is not available. Lack of confidence gives you no room to work the defense drive without pushing the avoidance threshold, so you cannot work this dog in defense. Your goal should be primarily confidence building through socialization, and part of that can be simple prey training.

Some dogs will not display defense drive at all until they are older, and again you cannot work a drive that is not in evidence. If you have a skilled helper evaluate your dog's defense drive and the threat meets not with any signs of pre-avoidance or stress, and the dog looks at you with confusion or simply attempts to play, again you have nothing to work with.

What kind of young dog can you work with? If your puppy does show signs of defense, barking defensively at people in the dark for example, reacting to body postures that convey threat, then you do have something to work with. Caution: in a young animal there is not a whole lot of room to work in defense. Threats that bring a clear defensive reaction cannot be pressed much at all in the beginning, and the dog must be worked properly toward our goal, making the dog comfortable working in defense. This is done by channeling from defense into prey.

Example: My wife is working a young Malinois puppy. He is very bold and confident, but doesn't show too much interest in rag play. He does like to bark at the action of other dogs working on the field while he is back-tied. He brings out a nice defensive bark while watching. He barks defensively when people come into the kennel area, too. This puppy's mother and father both show strong defensive drives, and high levels of confidence. How do we work him? With the helper at a distance, he gives lateral motion, then freezes and stares at the puppy. The puppy brings an alert stance out at the end of the line, and barks. The helper immediately reacts by running either laterally again or running away. The puppy moves at the end of the line with him, showing the prey drive and experiencing the confidence of scaring off the threat. This is the beginning of channeling, stimulate defense and channel it into a win for the puppy. We don't do too much of this, for work in defense has a cumulative effect on the stress of the puppy, we do not encroach on his space, everything is kept at the maximum distance needed just in order to stimulate the drive. Over time, months, we will slowly press closer, to raise the dog's threshold for avoidance, but only as he gains experience with winning these little confrontations. What is the payoff? When we work the rag play after a couple of these little confrontations, the dog releases his frustration on the soft leather rag, biting hard and more intensely than if we begin the session with only prey work. This is done carefully and thoughtfully, by only the most experienced decoys. Many new decoys, come too close to the dog too soon not being able to read the raising of the stress in the body posture or bark.

If we only were to work the rag play in prey, he would learn from this that he can bite softly, get distracted, and if we condition him to keep working this way, he will learn that this is the way bite work is done. This is poor foundation training.

But experiencing stress is essential. It builds the dog's ability to handle stress confidently. I must reiterate it is extremely gradual and the sessions are extremely short. Only once a week do we work like this, the other training sessions he is brought out to watch the big dogs work (Do they really learn anything from watching? Yes, there is a scientific term for mimicry behavior: Allelomimetic learning, (see Campbell, W. Owners Guide to Better Behavior in Dogs, Alpine Press, 1996). My retired competition dog Arrow of Tigerpaws, SchH 3, BH was trained in this exact fashion. He had little prey drive as a puppy, but was easy to stimulate in defense. Arrow was many times V rated in protection including 2 scores of 99 points, and a 97 at the 1996 National Championships. He plays schutzhund "for real". The channeling work from defense into prey enhanced his prey drive over time to a very high level. The other side of channeling from defense into prey is to also make the dog comfortable in the prey drive, because the dog learns it is comfortable to work there. He learns to enjoy the relief from the confrontation, and he learns to enjoy the power he feels after neutralizing the threat. He learns he is a winner.

In training a young dog or puppy, we must address that dog's strength, be it prey or defense. In a highly prey oriented dog with little or no defense, we concentrate on developing this strong prey response. But we must always be aware of trying to elicit the dog in defense as he matures so we can begin the channeling process. When the defense drive becomes apparent we must begin to address it so that the dog learns to work confidently in this drive. Be careful working too much and too long only in prey. You will get a false sense of security in your dog's ability to handle stressful confrontations. When he begins training and must work on new decoys in new places, he will be easy to push into avoidance, because he hasn't been taught to handle stress. New decoys and traveling will put your dog in defense. He must be confident to work there, or else you may get a big surprise during the attack on handler, or the courage test. All the bites in schutzhund are defensive bites except for the escape bite in schutzhund 2 & 3. Your schutzhund 1 routine is all defensive bites.

The fact is that not all dogs have the strong nerves necessary to work in protection. Working a dog only in prey during the foundation training and ignoring the defense training for fear that he might not be able to handle it, causes you to put in a lot of effort, and in the end, if he is not of strong character he will never make a good protection dog. A dog with weak nerves who may appear to work well in prey will begin to show signs of breakdown as you put the control work into

the dog. The bark and hold is always dirty because there is too much stress in the confrontation, and corrections from the handler (which puts the dog in defense, by the way) will display as shallow nervous grips, chewy grips, and sometimes avoidance of the helper. Such a dog was never given a chance from the start, because he was never taught to handle stress (read defense) in his foundation training. A dog trained through channeling from defense into prey will also work better in obedience, learning to handle the stress of correction with confidence. Those of you who train obedience and use corrections without releasing the dog to a toy (or vigorous play of some kind), build stress over time and never teach the dog there is a way out of the stress. Result: slow, fearful-looking obedience. This is also true in tracking: Force on the track is stress building, without teaching the dog how to release stress, your performance will be hectic and nervous, lacking the concentration born of confidence. It all plays in together. To your dog there are no distinct phases of training, there is only work. He must be taught how to work with confidence. Start it in your protection training by understanding channeling!

A final note: It has been said that in the sport of Ring, for example, the dogs are taught only to work in prey, and that prey "locked" dogs are good for the sport. I think this is a misunderstanding. The dog is what he is. If he can be stimulated in defense, surely he will be by a Ring decoy, as the pressure is applied with the stick, body contact and postures over the dog. From what I have seen, though, the Ring trainers that are successful make much use of channeling to build the confidence of these dogs to such a high level that no defensive pressure is seen to unnerve the dog. Over time the process of channeling makes the dog neutral to threats of all kinds, so it appears the dog only works in prey drive, because of the extremely high levels of confidence trained into the dog.

When schutzhund trainers work a dog in prey and introduce the dog to the stick, body contact, touching the head and under the jaw as they work, they are using channeling, because these things will provoke mild defensive feelings in the dog. But in my opinion, it is also important to stimulate the defense drive without the sleeve present to get the full effect of the dog's defensive drive in a "civil" (no equipment) situation. Here we really see the defensive drive in its purest form. We see the dog's ability to handle true confrontation, and stress. This is what is must be developed to make a powerful protection dog for any purpose.