

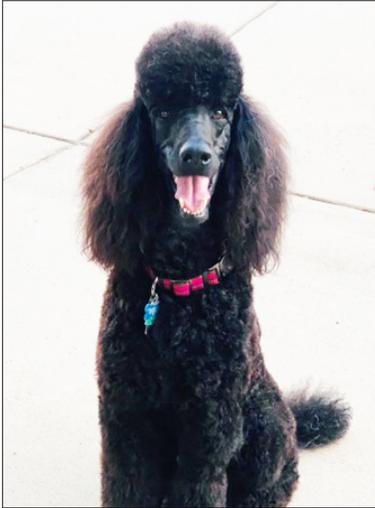
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## Displacement Behaviors Can Be Subtle But Significant: An Example of a Successful Virtual Consult on Displacement Behaviors

By Melissa McMath Hatfield, M.S., CBCC-KA, CDBC

**T**ye is a beautiful, black, 4-year-old neutered Standard Poodle. He is a walking AKC advertisement for the breed standard both in conformation and in temperament. One of my favorite breeds, he is a heart stopper. He is everything he is supposed to be: well trained, beautifully behaved, and extremely responsive to his owners. However, there is one behavioral problem that has gotten him into to some trouble: humping.

**History:** Tye was expelled from a play date facility for stalking and humping his fellow playmates. He was thorough about choosing his victims, but he did not care about gender. It seemed scent was his criterium for choosing his next target. Once the decision was made and the scent test passed, he was unrelenting in his stalking. With his nose under the tail of his unsuspecting victims, he would chase them at great lengths. No quick decisions here—he was a master stalker. Once the final decision had been made, he began humping in earnest and, of course, without permission. He was so intent on his mission that he was not responsive to redirection and/or correction, nor did he settle when removed from the play area. His arousal level remained high. The parents were called, they called their vet, who referred them to me.



Tye, a 4-year-old Standard Poodle

Multiple phone calls were made to the manager of the play date facility, as well as obtaining a written report and video. Parents also supplied their own videos, and in the history-gathering phase, we discovered a video of his humping behavior at 4 ½ months in a dog park play area. Tye had been adopted and neutered around 11 weeks of age. Since that time, he had had no behavioral problems or signs of aggression, fear, stress, or anxiety. He has

been a quick and compliant learner of the household rules and regulations and a joyful companion. Tye is a beautiful specimen who appears healthy and in his prime. He exhibits an excellent attention span, focus, compliance, intelligence, sensitivity, and willingness to please, all hallmarks of his breed. He has been socialized from an early age and has a history of getting along well with other dogs . . . outside of this current play date. That was the first clue. Why the inappropriate humping? Another red flag was that Tye's training capabilities were above the norm, and his excellent foundational training skills were a testimonial to his canine-human relationship with his pet parents. He was highly responsive to humans, well socialized in a previous play date, and had no history of dog-dog aggression or reactivity.

The parents reported that he had been to another play date facility before attending the one that excused him. There was no history of complaints from the previous play date facility. Why? What was the difference? What could be going on with him? The history was compiled, a behavior questionnaire and personality profile were completed, and a virtual consultation was scheduled.

**Observation:** While reviewing the play date video (the one from the facility from which he had been excused), something in it gave me pause. His fellow playmates were behaving in a way that made me look closer. Something was wrong. If one looked closely, the dogs' energy levels were consistent with each other, as if they were moving as a group at a similar rate of speed that looked unnatural. If you think about it, when you observe dogs in a play environment, some are running, others are chasing, rolling, sniffing, sitting—all doing more or less their own thing alone or with a playmate, but not moving as a mass of energy together. What was going on? Was it the environment? Was it because there were so many dogs in an enclosed area? Was it because they were indoors? Was it the combination of the two? What would this many dogs look like playing in a larger outdoor area? Was Tye reacting to the environment? Could this be environmental stress?

Since our goal was to eliminate potential causes and identify specific triggers, I asked what his behavior was like in the previous play date facility. Knowing that the first facility has less density in dog population, has a larger area, and the play date was outdoors, this was a critical comparison. The parents said that there had been no mention of behavioral problems in the previous play date or complaints about Tye humping. The manager of the previous play date facility confirmed the parents' report. Tye was no problem, and if there had been a humping incident, it was easily redirected.

The parents being the type of pet parents that they are, agreed to send Tye immediately back to the original play date facility. The manager provided videos and instructed her staff what triggers (getting a scent and stalking) to watch for and to redirect before Tye had an opportunity to begin his humping. Voila! The videos were beautiful. He was running, playing, with a huge grin and ears flying. Yes, there was some minor sniffing, but he responded to redirection beautifully before the stalking behavior began. Because there was no stalking, there was no humping. Because there was no humping, he was not overly aroused. Because he was not overly aroused, he was not put into a time out. The behavior sequence that was exhibited in the indoor play date was not exhibited in the outdoor play date. Tye was too aroused in the indoor facility to break the behavior sequence. In the outdoor facility, his stress levels were reduced, and he was more receptive to redirection.

There was another environmental difference between the two facilities. The indoor play date facility did not offer an area of escape or rest, nor were there breaks during the day. The outdoor play area offered multiple indoor rest periods during the day, giving the dogs an opportunity to regain their equilibrium and experience a state of calm, emotionally and physically.

There was yet another environmental difference. At the indoor facility, correction and redirection were given too late in the behavior sequence for Tye to stop. When removed for a timeout he was put in a stimulating environment where he could not recover his equilibrium. It was isolation but with full view of the other dogs, not a place to become quiet and calm. This added more stress to an already stressed Tye. Some dogs can handle the stimulation of a densely populated indoor facility, and some cannot. Tye thrives in effectively supervised, wide-open, less-dog-populated areas. Everyone has their individual tolerance for stimulation, dog or human, just as one human can handle large noisy crowds where another prefers to curl up on the couch with a good book.

## DIAGNOSIS

Displacement behavior — humping due to environmental stress.

### Prognosis (criteria from Shikashio, 2020)

Sociability—Human-Dog; Excellent

Dog-Dog (in general)—Excellent

Predictability—Behavior occurs in specific context and has not generalized to objects or humans.

Range of Antecedents—Narrow, very specific and easy to identify.

Intensity of Behavior—Intense

Training History—Foundational training skills excellent

Pet Parent Abilities to Manage—Excellent

Pet Parent Commitment—Excellent

Response to Behavior Modification—Excellent

Medical History—Recommend a veterinarian check, but as of this date no known medical issues

**Recommendation:** Since specific triggers were identified and the environment easily controlled, a behavior modification program began that included desensitization/counter conditioning and calming training. Tye was kept in the outdoor, less-populated play area where the environmental stress could be controlled. Was this displacement behavior due to environmental stress? Since we had a history of Tye’s behaviors in each environment with videos, it was easy to compare Tye’s behavior. His behavior did seem to be a coping strategy for environmental stress and not just bad manners.

In evaluating whether or not a behavior is a displacement behavior, context is critical. Ask, is this behavior appropriate for the situation? Overall body language of the dog should be observed closely within context as even subtle inappropriate behaviors can be signals the dog is experiencing stress. As Tye showed us, once his arousal became too high, his behavior could not be redirected, and it was difficult for him to recover to a calm state. Most displacement behaviors are subtle and quick; the lip licking or sniffing may seem natural. But you must be aware that what seems like minor natural behaviors can actually be a sign of stress, especially if they are inappropriate to the situation. “Displacement behavior occurs when an animal performs an act that is irrelevant to the behavioral context” (Breed & Moore, 2016).

According to Martha Knowles, “displacement behaviours are normal behaviours that seem displaced and are out of context” (Knowles, 2017). These behaviors occur when the dog is experiencing conflicting emotions in an attempt to deflect stress, uncertainty, anxiety, fear, fatigue, overstimulation, or frustration. The conflicting emotions reflect the dog’s inner emotional state and can be positive or negative (Knowles, 2017).

The following is a list from Knowles of some of the possible displacement behaviours:

- biting the lead
- scratching
- mouthing (mouthing people’s hands, legs, or clothing)
- mounting/humping
- chewing
- rolling on the ground
- licking or chewing body parts
- dog checking his/her uro-genital area
- hyped-up running/zooming around
- hyperactivity

- scratching the ground with back legs
- sniffing the ground
- shaking off
- lip licking
- yawning

**Summary:** This case had the advantages of a well-trained and socialized dog, committed parents, and two cooperative facility managers who could provide video and verbal and written reports. Their information was invaluable in assessing Tye and identifying his triggers. Because the two facilities were opposite in philosophy and environment, it was a simple matter of process of elimination. In which environment did the inappropriate behavior occur? In which environment could the behavior be redirected? Why could Tye maintain emotional equilibrium in one environment and not in the other? Once the displacement triggers were identified, it was easy for the staff to redirect the behavior, keeping arousal states low. Tye, however, was the best provider of information. Through his stress signals and overall body language, in context, he gave us the answers we needed. He was telling us loud and clear; we just had to listen with our eyes.



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