



SMALL DOG SYNDROME

SDS occurs in small dogs. SDS dogs bark at visitors, snap at guests, and, occasionally, even bite their owners. Everyone has met, at one time or another, a small dog with a very ugly personality. That dog, in all likelihood, has SDS.

Owners of small dogs pick them up. They pick their dogs up to pay attention to them. They pick their dogs up when visitors come to the door. They pick their dogs up to take them outside. Whatever the reason, SDS dogs spend more time than the average dog in their owner's arms.

From the small dog's perspective of the world, people are always much larger than it is. In a dog's world, size usually equals power. In other words, the larger and more powerful the dog, the higher rank it may have in its pack.

The small dog, due to its size, is relatively powerless in its human/animal relationship. Owners tend to swoop down, virtually out of nowhere, and scoop the tiny dog off its feet – much like a predator who might want to make the dog dinner would do!

Small dogs need to be treated like small dogs, i.e., a small "big" dog. A dog's mental/emotional needs do not change because of its size. A small dog needs less food, less water, and less floor (or couch) space but it needs similar PERSONAL space. Small dogs should not be picked up and carried around anymore than absolutely necessary.

Remember, this problem is not due in any large part to breeding; rather, it is primarily environmental in nature. Owners are the main contributing factor to SDS in their small dog!

Besides picking up their dog, what else might owners of small dogs do to cause SDS? When an owner picks up a small dog, while the dog is in their arms, they often stroke the dog and speak to it in such a way that the dog interprets as "rewarding." There are distinct similarities inherent in this act to methods used in attack dog training. No wonder so many small dogs have a Godzilla complex.

And, the more an owner dotes on a small dog, the worse the symptoms generally become. Dogs are opportunistic creatures and, if they think an owner likes or will reward a particular behavior, they will do it more often, especially if it gets them what they want.

Bottom line, do your best to avoid picking up a small dog. Let a small dog come to you for attention, etc., and, ONLY if the small dog indicates that it wants you to pick it up, should you attempt to do so. The dog might jump in your lap, stand with its front paws on the side of the bed or chair that you are sitting in, or on stand with its paws on your leg. All are indicators that the dog MIGHT want to be picked up; HOWEVER, should the dog try to avoid being picked up in any way, even if it just SEEMED to want it, do not pick it up.

Some people find it hard to accept that dogs have their own needs, both for attention and for privacy and, further, that their dog's needs might not necessarily coincide with their desires. This can and often does lead to trouble.

Small dogs, like big dogs, need to learn that we, as humans, have a right to do some things to them that they may not like, for instance, ear cleaning, nail trimming, giving it medicine, putting it in a kennel, etc. Reward the dog for compliance. If you are having trouble with your small dog "objecting" to any of these activities, try giving it a HUGE TREAT before you start doing something it might not want you to do. The object is to keep the dog's mouth very full and very busy while you are accomplishing whatever task you are attempting. And, remember, always reward the dog for good behavior.

Do not attempt to move the dog too quickly from terrible behavior to acceptable behavior, that can cause more problems. If nail-trimming is the goal, start by just touching the dog's leg and rewarding it. Gradually, over weeks, move down the dog's leg to its feet and eventually to the toes. Constantly rewarding good behavior and ignoring undesirable behavior.

If, after working diligently for a couple of months on "attitude" behaviors, and you see no improvement or are still having problems, keep the small dog on a leash when you are with it. Let it drag the leash around. If at any point it develops an "attitude" make a "ANK" noise and kennel it for 5 or 10 minutes. DO NOTHING ELSE! Do not hit or spank the dog. Do not continue to chastise it for its errant behavior. IGNORE IT as much as possible while taking it to its kennel for 5 or 10 minutes of "time out" for unwanted behaviors.

Keep this up and you should eventually see improvements in your small dog's behavior.

CAVEAT: The longer your dog has had the problem, the more time it will take to resolve it. Be patient, your dog is worth it.