

# Trust bonds

Aggression around food and visitors were the only remaining scars of a GSD's former life of abuse. Would the scars heal by slowly rebuilding the dog's confidence in people?

**S**ally, a 15-month-old German Shepherd Dog, was referred to me for help with two problems: aggression around food and aggression directed towards strangers visiting her home.

While Sally was eating, she would tense up, growl and eat faster if someone approached her, and she had once nipped a family member who reached for her bowl. Sally enjoyed her food, but she was underweight and the vet could find no physical cause.

Sally was never otherwise aggressive towards her family, but she would bark and lunge at visitors - quite a scary prospect in a big dog! She would settle when everyone sat down, but would start again if a visitor moved. She had snapped at a couple of people, so was fitted with a basket muzzle, which she seemed happy to wear.

Sally was seven months old when Sarah-Jane, her owner, rescued her from her former owner. Sally had been confined for most of her life to a crate,

was never walked and had been physically abused. On the rare occasions she was let out of her crate, she was kicked if she tried to eat any morsels of food that were dropped or left in the cat's bowl. She used to urinate in fear when visitors came, suffered chronic diarrhoea, and had urine burns on her legs from having to lie in her own waste.

When I went to see Sally, she had been living with Sarah-Jane, her younger brother and sister (aged 12 and 14), their parents, and the four family cats for eight months. Within this family environment, Sally had thrived. She now had long walks, frequent play with her favourite tennis balls, and, most importantly, lots of kind, loving company. Over time, Sally had learnt to trust the family, but Sarah-Jane was worried about Sally's remaining problems.

Sarah-Jane had read widely about dog training and behaviour modification methods and, despite being told by well-meaning people that she should

'show Sally who's boss' using various coercive techniques 'from the telly', she had wisely realised this was not the way to help her very frightened and confused dog. Sarah-Jane had already changed Sally's fear of strange dogs and people outside of the home by consistently rewarding her for calm behaviour so that, by the time of our consultation, Sally could simply focus on Sarah-Jane when something worried her while out on walks.

## On the ball

Sally had also been taught all the basic obedience cues and some tricks using tennis ball games as a reward, so I knew that one part of my job would be relatively easy: Sarah-Jane would need no persuasion that the COAPE ethos was the best and most effective way to help Sally!

When I arrived for the consultation, Sally was in the kitchen behind a closed door. Once I was seated, Sarah-Jane brought Sally, on her lead and

securely muzzled, into the sitting room. When Sally saw me, she started to bark, but she soon calmed down as she sniffed me and I talked gently to her. Sally settled and appeared to be very relaxed, at one point dozing off at Sarah-Jane's feet as the consultation progressed.

Before I left, I mentioned that movement is often a trigger for barking and lunging because an anxious dog can't predict what a moving person may do next but, as Sally still had her muzzle on and seemed very relaxed with me, I asked Sarah-Jane to leave Sally loose. As I stood up, Sally began to bark and lunge towards me from behind. She didn't touch me though, and Sarah-Jane calmly led her away.

I explained to Sarah-Jane that, although Sally now had a wonderful life, she was still carrying the scars of her appalling puppyhood experiences. Sally is now happy and confident at home, but there is an underlying anxiety that surfaces as soon as she is faced with a strange visitor. Sally learnt at an early age that people are unpredictable and may hurt her, so she tries to keep them at a distance by barking, lunging and snapping, and this aggressive display works for her - after all, it is a rare person who will not back away when a dog barks loudly or snaps! Sally had developed confidence in her way of coping with anxiety, but a truly confident dog would have no need to react in this way: she would be quite happy and unthreatened in the stranger's presence.

"But if she trusts us, why won't she let us near her food?" asked Sarah-Jane. I explained that, in common with many dogs, Sally was innately programmed to place great importance upon anything that is

essential for survival, especially food. Her aggression towards anyone approaching her food resulted from fear that it would be taken away or eaten. She was trying to say, "Please go away, this is mine!" despite the fact that no one in the Kenny family had ever given her any reason to be anxious. Food anxiety was obviously deeply hard-wired in Sally, and was probably compounded in her early life, as it so commonly is, by people forcing her to give up her food in the mistaken belief that she was trying to be 'dominant'.

## Not a threat

We needed to convince Sally that people were not a threat to her possession of food. Once she had learnt that people give rather than take away, she would feel no need for aggression. Similarly, we needed to change Sally's feelings towards visiting strangers so that her emotional response towards them was positive. She needed to build her confidence in people generally so that she no longer felt threatened.

We devised a plan that involved changing the way Sally was fed so that she started off with an empty bowl to which food was added as she was eating, initially from a distance.

The second part of the plan required recruiting stooge visitors. Fortunately, the Kenny family has many friends, relatives and acquaintances, many of whom were willing to help. We arranged that they would pay short visits, building up slowly from ignoring Sally completely to, much later, interacting with her directly. Initially, Sally would be safely behind a dog gate with Sarah-Jane, taking part in some fun games and training exercises, which would stop once the visitor left. Repeated often, this would reinforce an association between visitors, favourite

games and yummy treats. The visitors could then, very gradually, move on to taking part in the fun themselves.

I warned Sarah-Jane that changing Sally's feelings and her resulting behaviour towards both food and strangers would take months of consistent work, and that maintaining the change might be a lifetime's commitment. She assured me that she was willing to do whatever it took. I left the consultation feeling very optimistic.

Within a month of the consultation, Sally had relaxed so much around her food that Sarah-Jane could approach and touch her, and she would even share her food with the cats - previously unheard of. Best of all, Sally had put on 2.5 kilos!

Progress with visitors has been slower, mainly due to the practical considerations of setting up sessions, but Sally is improving. She is getting more used to accepting strangers in the house and, the last time I spoke to Sarah-Jane, Sally had just been to the vet. Previous vet visits had been very stressful, but, on this visit, Sally was calm and, although still nervous, managed to cope without aggression. The vet thought the change in her was not only impressive, but had also benefited Sally's general state of health.

Sally's case is a work in progress, despite some inevitable setbacks. If Sally gets upset, Sarah-Jane just keeps her calm and unstressed for a couple of days and then carries on.

It has been so gratifying to see the change in Sally because we know that she is behaving differently because she feels better! Calm confidence is slowly replacing her anxiety and I have high hopes that, with Sarah-Jane's dedication, the shadow of Sally's past life will fade away to nothing. ■



A former veterinary nurse, Debbie Ottway later progressed to studying animal behaviour to Master's degree level. While studying, she worked part-time at Wood Green Animal Shelter as well as in boarding catteries and kennels. After graduating, she lectured in animal science while researching, at various times, the behaviour of domestic cats, red kites and a species of Patagonian rodent called the Mara.

When Debbie decided to concentrate solely on companion animals, she chose COAPE to study for her Diploma in Companion Animal Behaviour and Training and is now a CAPBT practitioner, taking both canine and feline cases, mainly throughout Suffolk, Essex and South Cambridgeshire. Debbie is also a freelance writer.



Website: [www.walkingdogsfeedingmogs.co.uk](http://www.walkingdogsfeedingmogs.co.uk)  
 Email: [debbie@walkingdogsfeedingmogs.co.uk](mailto:debbie@walkingdogsfeedingmogs.co.uk)  
 Telephone number: 07748 819263



**Debbie Ottway**  
 BSc (hons: Animal Behaviour), MPhil, CABT

COAPE Association of Pet Behaviourists and Trainers  
[www.capbt.org](http://www.capbt.org) e-mail: [pethelp@capbt.org](mailto:pethelp@capbt.org)

