

# You Can Stop 'Accidents'

Lower excitement to cure submissive urination

by Amanda K. Jones

**O**ur Cocker Spaniel mix, Maggie, loves company, but when guests arrive, we tell them, "Please don't pet the dog!" This usually confuses visitors because Maggie acts happy to see them and tries hard not to be ignored. Our problem is this: When Maggie greets new visitors, she tends to become excited - so much so she loses control of her bladder.

Young dogs like Maggie will often spontaneously urinate when they get excited. They may also urinate when another animal or person they consider dominant or threatening approaches. In this case, the dog is "submitting" and the behavior is called "submissive urination."

It's hard to say if Maggie's behavior results from excitement or submissive urination. She doesn't show the more obvious signs of submissive urination, such as crouching low to the ground or rolling onto her back when someone reaches down to pet her. However, she does urinate when strangers greet her. This can mean that, even though she is happy to meet them, she may not trust them in the same way she trusts others she already knows.

Puppies and young dogs that have been abused understandably will show signs of submissive urination. However, many dogs that come from normal backgrounds can also exhibit the behavior.

Maggie is more than a year old, so you would expect she would have full control of her bladder

now, unlike a young puppy. She was also raised in a safe, well-socialized environment. But because she is part Cocker Spaniel, it's possible part of her problem is genetic.

In his book, *The Dog Who Loved Too Much* (Bantam), Dr. Nicholas H. Dodman writes: "Certain breeds, notably Cocker Spaniels, seem to be particularly prone to submissive urination."

Females are also more likely to show signs of submissive behavior. Dr. Dodman reasons that the male hormone, testosterone, tends to boost the confidence level of males during their early development and that this effect persists even if they have been neutered and the testosterone is long since gone.

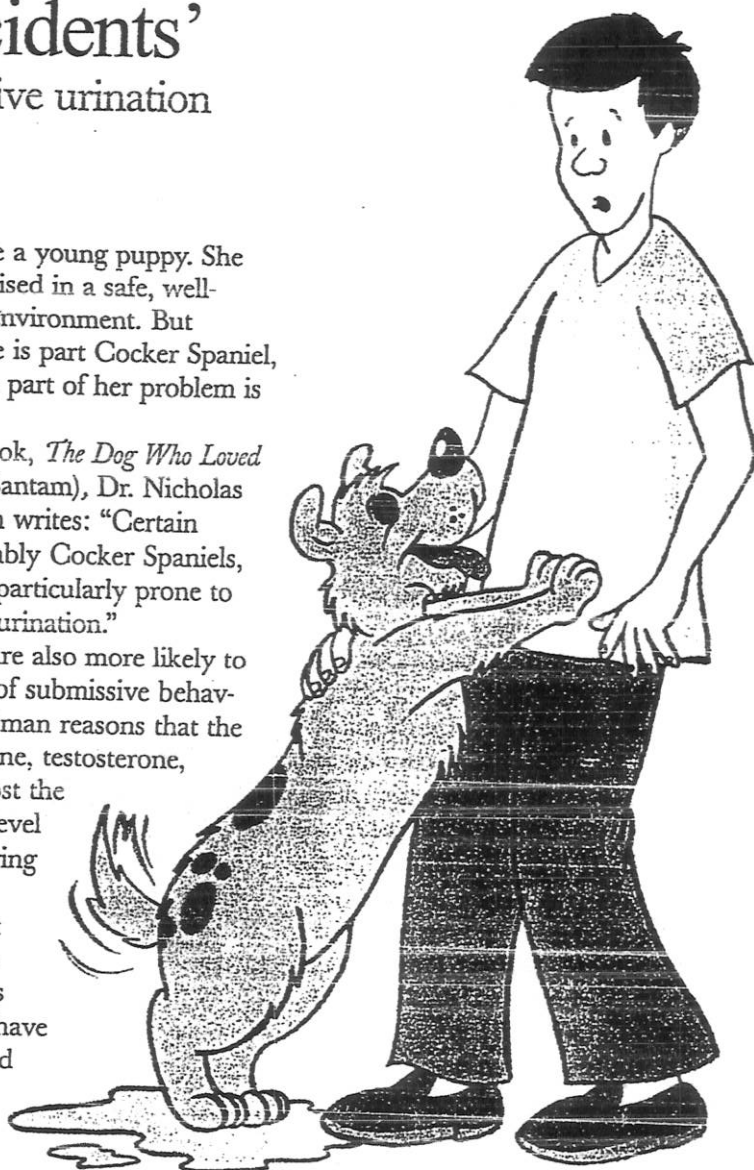
A guest entering your home is only one situation that may trigger excitement or cause fearful reactions in dogs, Dr. Dodman says. Others include:

- ▶ Over-affectionate greetings
- ▶ Arguments between people
- ▶ Scolding
- ▶ Loud noises

The domestic dog descends from the wolf. Both are social creatures

and have developed numerous ways to communicate. Anytime a dog feels vulnerable or threatened it will react in the same way as its distant wolf relatives.

In the wild, a wolf of high status, such as the alpha male, approaches a young wolf of low status. The young wolf is intimidated by the older wolf and doesn't want to be challenged by him. He crouches and urinates. He may roll onto his back. This tells the dominant wolf, "I understand that you are the boss of me - I am no threat to you." This pleases the dominant wolf



tremendously.

A mother will often roll a puppy onto its back to clean any urine or feces in the fur. This may be why a fearful dog urinates and rolls over when he feels threatened. He returns to his puppy days. He is trying to say, "I won't hurt you. See, I'm as helpless as a little puppy."

One day I went to visit a friend who owned a large dog. I took Maggie, who was about 8 months old at the time. When I stepped from the car, I held Maggie in my arms. My friend's dog approached us in a manner that must have seemed threatening to Maggie because before too long I felt a warm, wet sensation on my arm. Her instincts had kicked in.

A lot of people misinterpret the signals their dogs send them. For instance, a man comes home from a long day at work. He reaches down to pet his dog, and the dog urinates on the floor. The man might say, "She does it just to spite me. She's mad because I've been gone all day." This is not the case. What the man doesn't understand is that his dog has given him the ultimate compliment. It's no wonder the dog becomes confused.

#### What Can Be Done?

The first step in treating excitement and submissive urination is to determine its cause. Is it loud noises? Direct eye contact? In some cases, one particular person may spark the behavior. Perhaps the person has scolded the dog or reminds her of someone else she found to be intimidating. Usually, the person is male. Males tend to have deep voices and all statures, which trans-

late to "boss" in dog language.

In his book, *How to Speak Dog*, Dr. Stanley Coren, Ph.D., writes about Weedels, a Cocker Spaniel, and her owner, Stephen.

"In his early interactions with Weedels over her urinating on the floor (during house-training), he was particularly harsh in his corrections. This caused Weedels to become quite fearful of him."

Weedels urinated whenever Stephen reached down to pet her. His task is to appear more gentle and less threatening in Weedels' presence.

Observe your dog closely and you can determine the specific events, actions or people to cause it to urinate inappropriately. Then you can modify your dog's environment and eliminate the negative behavior. It's easier than you think. Some suggestions:

#### ► Tone it down a notch

Does your dog urinate when you greet her after a long day at work? Don't stand in front of your dog but instead kneel down to her level when you greet her. Don't reach

down to pet her on the top of the head – this can be very intimidating. Instead, avoid eye contact and pet her on the chest.

Make greetings low-key and boring. I know from experience this can be hard, especially when you are happy to greet your dog, but don't bowl her over with excitement. Verbally acknowledge your dog but wait until she has calmed down before you reward with hugs and kisses.

#### ► Improvise

The first thing I do when I arrive home from work is take Maggie outside. When she was younger, I would immediately grab the leash. Of course, every time I reached down to attach it to her collar, she would piddle all over the floor. When Maggie was a little pup, her mother grabbed her by the scruff when she wanted to get her attention. When I reached for that same area, Maggie became excited.

Finally, instead of trying to clip on her leash with the same soggy results day after day, I looped the end of it through the handle and

made a makeshift noose. Now my hand wasn't reaching toward her face. All I had to do was swoop the leash over her head and I could take her outside. I did this everyday until she was able to control herself when I got home.

In *The Dog Who Loved Too Much*, Dr. Dodman tells a story about Will and his dog Misty, also a Cocker Spaniel. Every time Will approached Misty to attach her leash onto her collar, she urinated. He tried everything – calling her to him, avoiding eye contact and crouching



Fearful dogs may urinate when you reach down to pet them because they perceive your stance as threatening. Instead, kneel on their level to pet them.

onto his knees. Nothing worked.

As a last resort, Dr. Dodman suggested Will try to attach Misty's leash with his backside toward her. So, on his knees, facing away from her, Will reached his arms backward and fumbled around until he was able to clip on her leash. The action must have looked pretty silly – which probably helped from Misty's point of view – but it worked! Just like Maggie, Misty outgrew her problem after a few weeks, and Will was able to attach her leash normally again.

#### ► Don't fuss

The worse thing you can do is scold your dog for submissive urination. In the words of Dr. Dodman, "The dog feels that it has not been humble enough and proceeds to squat even lower and urinate again. The only way to deal with these cases is to back off. The more active you become in trying to address this problem, the worse it becomes."

If a visitor comes to your house and causes your dog to urinate, don't make an issue out of it. Don't make a big fuss or apologize for your dog's "accident." Clean it up and move on.

#### ► Be prepared

If you know when guests will arrive, take your dog outside so he can empty his bladder ahead of time. If I'm expecting a guest at 3 o'clock, I'll take Maggie outside around 2:45. Sometimes, we'll even hold the initial greeting outside to avoid any "accidents."

If the initial meeting occurs inside, ask guests not to pet your dog and explain why. After the novelty of a new visitor has worn off, your dog may be relaxed enough for petting.

The second objective in treating submissive urination is to increase

your dog's level of confidence. Dr. Dodman suggests taking him dog to non-confrontational training school. A dog trained to behave properly will also be more confident.

You can also build confidence by simply playing with your dog. Fetch, tug of war and wrestling can improve your dog's confidence level. (Note: Games like tug of war and play fighting can make aggressive, already confident dogs more aggressive.) When you play these games with your submissive dog, let him win. Find a game your dog thinks is really fun and use it as way to help him overcome his fears.

It's important to remember puppies naturally become more confident as they grow older. Most will outgrow submissive urination before 1 year of age. Also, don't encourage or reinforce negative behavior. For example, if your puppy retreats to a corner and urinates during a thunderstorm, don't run over and try to calm and soothe her. This may seem cruel, but acknowledging her reaction will only encourage the behavior. Your puppy thinks, "OK – I urinated because that noise scared me. Now I'm getting petted. I must have done a good job."

Next time a big storm occurs, break out the treat bag. Have fun and play games. Your puppy will associate the storm with fun times. Praise the puppy only when she shows confidence.

If you drop a pot on the kitchen floor and the crash makes your dog urinate, don't run over and say, "Oh, I'm so sorry I scared you . . ." Simply clean it up.

While puppies may overcome their fears more easily, it may take an older dog longer. Continue to avoid the negative situations while increasing your dog's level of

confidence with other activities.

If submissive urination occurs after 2 years of age or after several weeks of behavioral and environmental modification techniques, you may want to consult with your veterinarian. He or she may recommend putting your dog on a safe, non-permanent drug therapy program. It is also a good idea to rule out any medical problems that could be causing your dog to urinate uncontrollably.

One drug your veterinarian may recommend is amitriptyline ("Elavil"), a tri-cyclic anti-depressant. The drug works to control submissive urination in three ways, Dr. Dodman says. First, by increasing the amount of serotonin in the brain, it will elevate your dog's mood and increase its confidence. Secondly, it tightens the sphincter muscles in the bladder. Lastly, it increases the "holding capacity" of your dog's bladder.

When dealing with submissive urination, remember to be patient. Don't expect results overnight. Acknowledge that despite your efforts, you still may face some "accidents," especially in the early stages of retraining.

All too often owners give up on their pets – especially those with urinating problems.

Dr. Dodman writes: "If someone doesn't give frustrated owners of 'problem eliminators' the right advice fairly early on, the dog can rapidly find itself in a Russian roulette-type adoption situation in which (according to published figures) the gun has three chambers and two of them are loaded."

If your dog exhibits submissive urination, let's hope this advice helps.

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