

# Marking (Dogs)

VANESSA WILLIAMS · TUESDAY, MAY 12, 2020 ·

Marking is a completely natural behavior for dogs and usually consists of urine, but feces may also be used. Both males and females will mark (though males mark more frequently), whether intact and fixed. There are three general categories for marking behavior.

## Social

Dogs are incredibly social animals and their primary sense is that of smell. Dogs can learn all kinds of things about another dog from processing the individual smell of another dog's scentmark. Some of these possibilities are:

- Age
- Gender
- Neuter status
- Health
- Sexual receptivity
- Size
- When they were there
- And more!

Social marking is usually done on landmarks while in an area other dogs frequent. Mailboxes and tall tufts of grass and piles of leaves are favorites in my area. For them, a sniffing walk around the neighborhood is like being on facebook scrolling through your newsfeed. They can sniff ("liking") and leave their own mark

("commenting" and "posting"). Marking outdoors is a very healthy social enrichment behavior that should be allowed!

**FUN FACT:** Dogs can even "boast" in their marking. Ever wonder why male dogs raise their leg to mark? The higher they can hike that leg up, the higher they can leave their mark, which makes them look like a bigger dog to the dog that will come later to smell it!

## Territorial

Territorial marking occurs in order to prevent conflict between two social creatures. Often this means between two dogs, but sometimes between the dog and another pet (like a cat) or even a human. Territorial marking is to set up boundaries and is a way for the dog to say: "This thing is mine, this area is mine, do not enter". Creating boundaries using scent can help the dog adjust and prevent fighting. This can happen when a new pet is introduced into the home, especially if it is a stressful introduction or they don't get along well. To solve this, it's important that the relationship between the dog and the other pet is repaired/strengthened so that the dogs are comfortable sharing a territory.

Territorial marking can also be a biological drive. Intact males have hormones that encourage them to leave their mark. This works both to claim territory and also to invite receptive females. Dogs are no longer wild animals with a territory to patrol and keep, but they still have those hormones telling them to do so. This can lead to excessive marking indoors as the dog finds that biology encouraging him to leave his mark. **Neutering** can help solve this, but if it occurs for any length of time, it can become a habit that will need training help too. Training for this type of territorial marking is the same as general housetraining: no freedom without supervision, reward for marking outdoors, gradually increase freedom as the dog succeeds. (Please see the guide dedicated to housebreaking for more details)

# Stress

Stress is the most common reason that dogs mark indoors. When dogs are stressed, sometimes surrounding themselves with their own scent can help make them feel more secure. Stressful marking can present itself either general household marking or more targeted marking. Sometimes a dog can feel better by mingling their scent with that of their people. If this is the case, they often target the clothing or bedding of that person. In addition to these reasons, eliminating itself provides a release that physically feels good.

Stress marking usually happens with a large change in the household or routine or when you first bring the dog home. Many dogs, especially males, find marking stress relieving when in a brand new place. This can include getting a new pet, having visitors (especially if they bring a pet), having a baby, moving in with family or a spouse or roommate, job changes that significantly alter the routine, moving house, or even things like loud construction going on nearby. Especially when your pet's world is small and limited to your home, new things that alter that home can be very stressful.

To solve stress marking, you first have to resolve the root cause of the stress. If it is general anxiety or fear, then working with a veterinary behaviorist may be your best bet. Otherwise being diligent about going back to housetraining basics and providing stress relief for the dog while they get used to the change is important. Giving the dog more appropriate coping mechanisms for stress like the following can help:

- Sniffing of all kinds is stress relieving for dogs. Their heart-rate slows, blood pressure goes down, the brain is focusing on processing. Nosework games are great, as are long sniffing walks. Praise the dog for sniffing and marking socially to help teach him where marking belongs while reducing his stress at the same time!

- Chewing and licking are also stress relieving. Appropriate and safe chews or stuffed Kong toys can help a dog work out some of that frustration and stress without resorting to marking. These are also a great way to make the freedom reductions when you cant supervise more enjoyable for dogs.
- Building a sound routine can help. If your dog knows what to expect, then the stress of the unexpected or new change will go down. If something in your life changes, try to keep everything else the same: walk times, feeding times, snuggling TV time to wind down at night, potty breaks, etc.
- Dont scold or punish your pet for marking. Especially if your pet is marking for stress relief, scolding will only increase stress and therefor increase the drive to mark. Interrupt them (hand clap, calling their name, gently moving them if on a leash etc) and then take them outside.