



Understanding Aggressive Behavior in Dogs

The word “aggression” can refer to a range of behaviors from barking and growling, snarling and snapping, to biting and attacking. Threats of aggression are one way dogs have of communicating and are often displayed as a means of avoiding outright aggression. However, a threat (growling or snapping) may escalate to biting in any given situation if the original warnings are ignored.

There are many different reasons for aggression. Because aggression is so complex, and because the potential consequences are so serious, we recommend that you get professional in-home help from a certified dog trainer or behavior consultant if your dog is displaying aggressive behavior.

Types of Aggression

Fear-Based Aggression is a defensive reaction and occurs when a dog believes he is in danger of being harmed. It is the dog's perception of the situation, not your intent that determines his response. For example, you may raise your arm to throw a ball, but if your dog perceives this to be a threat, he may bite you to protect himself from being hit. The same situation can occur if you reach towards a dog to pet them lovingly, but the dog is afraid of being touched and growls or air snaps in an effort to get you to move away. While you may mean well, the dog is still perceiving you as a threat and may react accordingly. Most of the time, the dog is trying to give a warning rather than actually injure you.

Protective, Territorial and Possessive Aggression are all similar, and involve the defense of valuable resources.

Territorial aggression is usually associated with defense of property or space. Be aware that your dog's sense of territory may extend well past the boundaries of his yard. For example, if you walk your dog regularly around the neighborhood, to him, his territory may be the entire block.

Protective aggression usually refers to aggression directed toward people or animals that a dog perceives as threats to his family. One specific type of protective aggression is maternal aggression, where mother dogs become protective of their puppies.

Dogs that are possessively aggressive may defend their food, toys, or other valued objects, such as tissues or food scraps stolen from the trash.

Frustration Aggression

Some dogs, if restrained when aroused or excited, will be aggressive toward the persons restraining them. A dog being held back by the collar may turn and bite the hand on the collar. A related type of aggression is barrier frustration and manifests when dogs are in a cage, crate, or car. Aggression in these circumstances, however, may also be defensive and/or territorial.

Redirected Aggression is a type of frustration aggression that is relatively common. If a dog is aroused into an aggressive response by a person or animal that he is prevented from reaching, he may redirect this aggression onto someone nearby. Owners are often bitten when they try to intervene in a fight between two family dogs. Another example occurs when two family dogs become excited, bark and growl in response to another dog passing by the yard. The two dogs, confined behind a fence, may turn and attack each other because the fence prevents them from getting to the intruder.

Pain-elicited Aggression

An otherwise friendly and social dog may also bite or snap if touched when he is in pain. You may be treating him or attempting to help him, but he perceives any touch from you as potentially painful and snaps or bites to make you go away. If you are working with a dog in pain, it is a good precaution to muzzle the dog. Some training tools that inflict pain, such as prong collars or shock collars, may provoke a dog to pain-elicited aggression.

Predation follows a natural sequence of see-chase-grab-kill. Not all dogs follow through with the entire sequence, but may choose a particular part that is most rewarding for them. For example, herding breeds tend to have a strong chase drive, while terriers may be more likely to grab and shake. Predation is natural and instinctive, and therefore cannot be trained out or “fixed.” Dogs that show prey drive should not live with small animals, and in extreme situations, small children.

Individual Variation

Dogs differ in their likelihood to show aggressive behavior in any particular situation. Some dogs tend to respond aggressively with little stimulation. Others may be subjected to all kinds of threatening stimuli and never attempt to bite. The difference in this threshold at which a dog displays aggressive behavior is influenced by both environmental and genetic factors. If this threshold is low, a dog will be more likely to bite. Raising the threshold makes a dog less likely to respond aggressively. This threshold can be raised using behavior modification techniques. How easily the threshold can be changed is influenced by the dog's gender, age, breed, general temperament, and by whether the appropriate behavior modification techniques are chosen and correctly implemented.

Working with aggressive behavior can be potentially dangerous, and should be done only by, or under the guidance of, an experienced animal behavior professional who understands animal learning theory and behavior.

What You Can Do

First, check with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior.

Spay or neuter your dog. Intact dogs may be more likely to display social, territorial and protective aggressive behavior.

Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems may require in-home help from a professional.

Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine, and/or restrict your dog's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for your dog's behavior.

Avoid exposing your dog to situations where he is more likely to show aggression. You may need to keep him confined to a safe room and limit his contact with people.

If your dog is possessive of food, treats, or a certain place, don't allow him access to those items. In an emergency, bribe him with something better than what he has. For example, if he steals your shoe, trade the shoe for a piece of chicken. Toss the chicken across the room and pick up the shoe only after your dog has dropped it and moved away.

What Not To Do

Punishment will not help. In fact, it will likely make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make your dog more fearful and therefore more aggressive. Attempting to punish or physically "dominate" a dog may cause him to escalate his behavior, likely resulting in biting.

Do not encourage aggressive behavior. When dogs are encouraged to "go get 'em" or to bark and dash about in response to outside noises or at the approach of a person, territorial and protective aggressive behavior may be the result. Your dog won't understand the difference between when he is supposed to react defensively and when it isn't appropriate.

Deciding Whether to Work with Your Dog

Working with aggressive behavior requires resources—time, money, and training skills. It also involves risk to you and to others who might be injured. Deciding whether to work with a dog with aggression issues is a difficult decision. You may wish to consider the following factors in making your decision:

Severity of the aggression: Dogs that have only growled, snarled, or air snapped (making no contact) are safer to live and work with than dogs that bite. However, these displays of aggression may escalate if the problem is untreated or treated incorrectly.

Warning signs: Dogs that give warnings before they bite—tensing, growling, baring teeth—allow people and other animals to retreat; dogs that bite with little or no warning are tougher to manage.

Targets and triggers: If the trigger for the aggression is easily avoided, treating the behavior may be easier and less risky. For example, if a dog is fearful of children and responds with defensive aggression, management of the problem would be easier for a childless couple who have few visiting children than for a family that has children or frequently visiting children.

Duration of the problem and reinforcement history: The longer the behavior has been going on and the extent to which the dog has been successfully practicing the behavior, the harder it can be to resolve it through behavior modification. For example, if the dog that is fearful of children has been successfully scaring them off for months or years through displays of aggression, it will take more work to resolve this behavior.

Ease of motivating your dog: Treating an aggression problem involves working with a qualified professional. Behavior modification for aggression should focus on rewarding good behavior. Rewards can include food, play, and even attention. Behavior modification is likely to be more successful with dogs that enjoy these rewards. Dogs that are not motivated by these common rewards can be more challenging to work with.

Your ability to manage the risk of an incident: While you work on behavior modification, you will need to manage the dog and his environment to avoid an incident. This means the dog needs to be safely confined and his contact with potential triggers and targets kept to a minimum. If you cannot implement and enforce restrictions on the dog's activities and interactions, you are at greater risk of having an incident occur.

Your willingness and ability to commit resources to resolving the problem: Behavior modification will require daily training sessions as well as sessions with a professional. If you do not have the time or money to do this, the chances that the problem will be resolved are slim.

If you decide that you cannot work with your dog's aggression issues, you may want to consider rehoming or surrendering him to a shelter. Rehoming the dog with someone that is better equipped to manage and/or modify the behavior may be an option, but please be honest about the aggression issues with anyone who is taking the dog and be sure that the

new owners will be able to follow through with proper behavior modification. A person who is unaware of the dog's problems could be injured by him, and an aggressive dog may be abused, abandoned or neglected as a result of his behavior.

Ask For Help

Please contact Homeward Pet Adoption Center's Animal Behavior Manager or another certified professional if you need additional assistance. When working with professional trainers, we strongly recommend avoiding hiring anyone who recommends the use of punishment or other fear based methods like prong or shock collars, alpha rolling, shake cans, or any other physical force.