

AGGRESSION IN DOGS A SERIOUS PROBLEM

Dog aggression is any behavior in a dog meant to intimidate or harm another animal or person. Growling, baring teeth, snarling, snapping and biting are all aggressive behaviors. From a dog's perspective there is always a reason for the aggressive behavior (i.e. they perceive a person's behavior as threatening or intimidating even if the person is trying to be friendly) but as the potential consequences are so serious, aggression should always be considered unacceptable.

TYPES OF AGGRESSION

1) **DOMINANCE AGGRESSION** is motivated by a challenge to a dog's social status or to his control of a social situation. Dogs are social animals and view their human families as part of their "social pack". Based on the outcomes of social challenges amongst the members of the "pack" a dominance hierarchy or pecking order is established. If your dog perceives his ranking to be higher than yours it is likely that he will challenge you in certain situations, i.e. a dominantly aggressive dog may growl if he is disturbed when he is resting/sleeping, if he is asked to give up a favorite spot on the couch/bed, when he is physically restrained (e.g. hugged) or when you reach over his head or for his collar. They are often called "Jekyll and Hyde" as they are very friendly when not challenged.

2) **FEAR-MOTIVATED AGGRESSION** is a defensive reaction when the dog perceives he is in danger of being hurt, i.e. if you raise your hand to do something he may think he is going to get hit or being in an unfamiliar environment e.g. a vet hospital.

3) **PROTECTIVE, TERRITORIAL AND POSSESSIVE AGGRESSION** all involve the dog defending a valuable resource e.g. his yard, a toy, food, female dog with puppies.

4) **REDIRECTED AGGRESSION** is when a dog is aroused into an aggressive response but is prevented from attacking he may redirect this aggression onto someone else, i.e. 2 dogs get excited, bark and growl at a dog walking past their yard the 2 dogs are confined behind a fence may attack each other because they can't attack the "intruder" walking past.

All dogs have the potential to be aggressive. Some tend to be aggressive with very little stimulation whilst others may be subjected to all types of threatening stimuli and never attempt to bite. The difference in this threshold at which the dog displays aggressive behavior is influenced by both genetic (breed, sex, age, general temperament) and environmental factors (training, responses of the human family to previous signs of aggression).

AGGRESSIVE DOGS ARE DANGEROUS. Seek professional help at the first signs of aggression, as the problem will worsen with time and it will not go away without behavior modification training. Some general tips include: -

ALWAYS

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

You are liable for your dogs behavior - if you take your dog out in public or to the vet hospital, grooming salon etc consider a cage muzzle as a temporary precaution but keep in mind some dogs can get muzzles off.

If your dog is possessive of food, toys, or a certain place (e.g. bed/chair) do not allow him access to these places - if he gains access to the item/place, then use bribes (food) to get him to release the item or jump down.

NEVER punish an aggressive dog - it will make the problem worse. You need to use behavior modification and positive reinforcement to stop the behavior continuing and escalating.

NEVER encourage aggressive behavior - e.g. a) playing tug of war or wrestling games encourages your dog to "win" over you which can make dominance behavior worse. b) encouraging dogs to "go get them" or bark and dash about in response to a person approaching/noise may escalate territorial and protective aggression. c) soothe or comfort your dog when it is showing signs of fear aggression (i.e. don't say it's okay) as what you are saying is its ok to be aggressive.

PREVENTION - TAKE THE GRR.....OUT OF AGGRESSION BY

Socialize your puppy from 6 weeks of age - expose them to different people, places, noises, smells, other animals etc on a regular basis - puppy preschool is a good way to start.

Train your dog basic obedience to sit, drop and stay on command. Also teach it not to jump up onto people and not to demand attention - always use positive reinforcement to train - i.e. praise good behavior. Start this at 6 weeks of age. Go to a local training club to, as it's a good way to continue socializing your dog with other dogs and people.

Neuter your dog early in life.

Use "Nothing in life is for free" conditioning - its a safe non-confrontational way to establish your leadership - it requires your dog to "work" for everything he gets from you e.g. before he is given food, has a lead put on before a walk, before a pat or a cuddle, before you play a game with him, before he is allowed up on furniture etc he must complete a command for you (e.g. sit or drop). When he does this he then gets the "treat" of food or a game is played or he gets the lead on to go for a walk or you pat the couch and let him know its ok to jump up onto.

THE FEARFUL DOG

Dogs may exhibit a variety of behaviors when they are afraid. They lower their head, flatten their ears against their head, tuck the tail between the back legs, some may pant, salivate, tremble and/or pace. A frightened dog may try to escape, may show submissive behavior (avoid eye contact, urinate, roll over and expose their belly) or they may freeze and remain immobile, they may bark/growl and in some cases they may become destructive.

Causes of fear - there are many causes of fear including lack or improper socialization when young as well as specific incidences that happened in their life (e.g. vets, a storm, car rides etc). Using desensitization and counter conditioning techniques, which require a lot of time and patience from the owner, can treat most fears. Medications are also available to reduce some of the anxiety whilst the behavior modification training starts.

DESENSITISATION

Begin by exposing your dog to a very low level of whatever is causing the fear. E.g. if he is afraid of bicycles start with the bike 100 feet away from him. If he is scared of thunder start with a tape/cd of a thunderstorm (can be purchased from good music stores) and play it at a volume you can just hear.

Reward him for calm non-fearful behavior - as long as he remains relaxed reward him with treats and praise. Very gradually increase the level of what he is scared of (e.g. move the bicycle 1 foot closer at a time; gradually increase the volume on the stereo). Again praising for not showing any anxious behavior. As soon as any anxiety is shown drop back one step (i.e. move the bike back 1 foot, reduce the volume a notch) The process can take days to months. You must proceed at a slow enough pace that your dog never becomes fearful during the desensitization process.

When your dog remains relaxed in the presence of stationary objects (e.g. the bicycle) move it back to where you started and get someone to slowly ride it. Again slowly bringing it closer whilst at the same time praising him for relaxed behavior.

COUNTER CONDITIONING - works best when used with desensitization and involves pairing the fear stimulus with an activity or behavior incompatible with the fear behavior.

Using the desensitization technique described above whilst your dog is exposed to a low level of the fear then ask him to perform some obedience exercises (e.g. sit, down) reward him for obeying and continue to have him obey commands as the level of exposure increases slowly.

Obviously your dog must know these commands first - teach them using positive reinforcement (treats, praise) never use punishment, collar corrections or scolding to teach the commands as the point of counter conditioning is for him to associate pleasant things (the commands) with the things that frighten him (noise, bicycle etc).

Desensitization and counter conditioning can be hard to do - some things are hard to reproduce and it takes a lot of time and patience. Never push them, as a fearful dog that feels trapped or pushed too hard will respond aggressively to what frightens them. If there are any signs of aggression (growl, snarl, baring teeth etc) stop all behavior modification procedures immediately and seek specialist behavior advice.

NEVER Punish your dog for being afraid - it will make him worse.

NEVER Force your dog to experience an object/situation that makes him fearful. E.g. if he is afraid of bicycles do not force him to stand in a place where bicycles whiz by - it will make him worse.

NEVER Praise your dog when they are showing any signs of fear/anxiety - what you are saying is its okay to be scared. Only praise when they are calm and relaxed.

NEVER punish your dog after the fact for destruction or house soiling caused by fear or anxiety even if its only seconds after the fact. The behavior is out of panic not misbehavior and punishment will make them worse.

THE DOMINANT DOG

Dogs are social animals that live in groups in which there is an established social hierarchy, which serves to maintain order, reduce conflict and promote co-operation amongst family members. The position of each member of the group is determined by the outcomes of interactions between themselves and other pack members. The more dominant animals can control access to valued items (e.g. food, den sites, mates, toys, sleeping/resting places etc). It is essential that all humans in the household assume the highest position of dominance. Dogs must assume a neutral or submissive role towards all people. Some dogs will challenge their owners for dominance - they may stare, bark, growl, snap or bite when they are given a command or asked to give up a toy, treat or resting place. Some will also react aggressively to grooming, patting or hugging as the dog perceives these as dominant behaviors (these actions are dominant behaviors displayed by dominant dogs to submissive dogs). Never the less a dominant dog may still be very affectionate and may solicit petting and attention from you (sometimes it's only when he wants it not when you want it).

SIGNS OF A DOMINANT DOG

He resists obeying commands that he knows well

He won't move out of your way when required

He nudges your hand, takes your arm in his mouth or insists on being petted or played with - i.e. he is ordering you to obey him.

He defends his food bowl, toys or other objects

He growls or bears his teeth at you under any circumstance

He won't let anyone (you, the vet, groomer etc) give him medication or handle him

He gets up on furniture without permission and won't get down

He snaps at you

If you recognize any signs of dominance it is essential to get help immediately. These dogs are potentially dangerous and the behavior tends to worsen with time. No physical punishment should be used, as this will make a dominant dog worse.

TO HELP GAIN CONTROL

Avoid situations that elicit the behavior - stop them getting up on furniture, don't try to take possessions away from them etc. To get them down or to get them to drop an item bribe them with something (e.g. a treat).

During times your dog is acting aggressively back off and use "happy talk" to relieve the tenseness of the situation.

Supervise, confine or restrict your dogs' activities as necessary especially when children or other pets are present.

When outdoors with your dog use a Gentle leader, Halti collar and/or muzzle.

When indoors control access to the house by using baby gates and or crating your dog, closing doors off to bedrooms etc.

Desex your pet early in life.

Do not feed your dog "people food" from the table, do not allow begging. You should always feed your human family first (this reinforces to the dog that people are dominant); never let your dog eat whilst you are eating. Make him wait at least 10-15 minutes after you have finished before you feed him.

Do not play tug of war, wrestle or play roughly.

Ignore barking, jumping up and nudging for attention. Wait until he is not asking for attention, call him to sit then give the attention he wanted.

Use the "nothing in life is free" every day - this means that your dog must "work" or obey a command before any pleasure in life is given. e.g. He must sit before he gets a pat, gets his dinner, gets his lead on to go for a walk, gets a toy thrown, be invited up onto the couch etc. If he does not obey - ignore him and try again 10 minutes later - the reward for him obeying is getting the attention/food etc that he wants.

Always reward good behavior.

At all times you must realize that behavioral modification takes time and during this time there is a risk involved - you need to decide whether you are willing to take that risk. There are no guarantees but if the time, persistence, patience is put into behavioral modification training significant improvements can be made.

For more information or to put you in contact with a behavioral specialist please ask