



Understanding Aggressive Behavior in Dogs

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Dog aggression in any behavior meant to intimidate or harm a person or another animal. Growling, baring teeth, snarling, snapping and biting are all aggressive behaviors. Although aggressive behaviors are normal for dogs they generally unacceptable to humans. From a dog's perspective, there's always a reason for aggressive behavior. Because humans and dogs have different communication systems, misunderstandings can occur between the two species. A person may intend to be friendly, but a dog may perceive that persons behavior as threatening or intimidating. Dogs aren't schizophrenic, psychotic, crazy, or necessarily "vicious," when displaying aggressive behavior.

Because aggression is so complex, and because the potential consequences are so serious, we recommend that you get professional in-home help from an animal behavior specialist or a professional dog trainer if your dog is displaying aggressive behavior.

Types of Aggression

Fear motivated aggression: fear motivated aggression is a defensive reaction and occurs when a dog believes he is in danger of being harmed. Remember that it's your dogs perception of the situation, not your actual intent, which determines you dog's response. For example, you may raise your arm to throw a ball, but your dog, perceiving this to be a threat, may bite you because he believes he is protecting himself from being hit. A dog may also be fearfully aggressive when approached by other dogs, or even when you reach for his collar or raise your voice at someone else. Most aggression we see in dogs, is fear related.

Protective, territorial and possessive Aggression: Protective, territorial and possessive aggression are all very similar, and involve the defense of valuable resources. **Territorial aggression** is usually associated with defense of property. However, 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 and allow him to urine-mark, 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, or pack. Dog's become **possessively aggressive** when defending their food, toys or other valued objects, such as Kleenex stolen from the trash!

Redirected aggression: this type of aggression is relatively common, but is a behavior that pet owners may not always understand. If a dog is aroused into an aggressive response by a person or animal that he is prevented from attacking, he may redirect this aggression onto someone else. A common example occurs when two family dogs become excited, bark and growl in response to another dog passing through the front yard. The two dog's, confined behind a fence, may turn and attack each other because they can't attack the intruder.

Predation: is usually considered_ to be a unique form of aggressive behavior, because it's motivated by the intent to obtain food, And not primarily by the intent to harm or intimidate.

(Understanding Aggressive Behavior in Dogs – continued)

Dominance aggression: Dominance aggression is motivated by challenge to a dog's social status or to his control of a social interaction. Dog's are social animals and view their human families as their social group or "pack." Based on the outcomes of social challenges among group members, a dominance hierarchy or "pecking order" is established and in a small number of cases can cause problems among family members.

Individual Variation

Dog's differ in their likelihood to show aggressive behavior in any particular situation. Some dog's tend to respond aggressively with very little stimulation. Others may be subjected to all kinds of threatening stimuli and events, and never attempt top 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 may 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 dog's can be potentially dangerous, and should be done only by, or under the guidance of, an experienced professional who understands animal learning theory and behavior.

What Can You Do

- First check with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior.
- Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal behavior specialist or a professional dog trainer.
- 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're liable for your dog's behavior. If you must take your dog out in public, consider a cage-type muzzle as a temporary precaution, and keep in mind that some dog's can get a muzzle off.
- 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 people-contact.
- 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 him the shoe for a piece of chicken.
- Spay or neuter your dog. Intact dogs are more likely to display dominance, territorial and protective aggressive behavior.

What Not To Do

- Punishment won't help and, in fact, will 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 dominate a dominantly aggressive dog is likely to cause him to escalate his behavior in order to retain his dominant position. This is likely to result in a bite or a severe attack. Punishing territorial, possessive or protective aggression is likely to elicit additional defensive aggression.
- Don't encourage aggressive behavior. When dog's 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.