

**A DOG'S BARK MAY BE WORSE THAN HIS BITE**, but most of us would rather not find out the hard way. Growling, baring teeth, snarling, snapping, and biting are all aggressive behaviours—but dog aggression includes any behaviour meant to intimidate or harm a person or another animal. Although these messages are among the handful of communication tools available to dogs, they're generally unacceptable to humans. Because humans and dogs have different communication systems, misunderstandings can occur between the two species.

But from a dog's perspective, there's always a reason for aggressive behaviour. A person may intend to be friendly, but a dog may perceive that person's behaviour as threatening or intimidating. Dogs aren't being schizophrenic, psychotic, crazy, or necessarily "vicious" when displaying aggressive behaviour.

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

### Types of Aggression

**Dominance Aggression:** Dominance aggression is an abnormal, inappropriate, out of context aggression, when access to a resource is controlled (Overall, 1997). Because people don't always understand canine communication, you may inadvertently challenge your dog's social position. A dominantly aggressive dog may growl if he is disturbed when resting or sleeping, or if he is asked to give up a favorite spot, such as the couch or the bed. Physical restraint, even when done in a friendly manner, like hugging, may also cause your dog to respond aggressively. Reaching for your dog's collar or reaching out over his head to pet him, could also be interpreted by him as a challenge for dominance. Dominantly aggressive dogs are often described as "Jekyll and Hydes" because they can be very friendly when not challenged. Dominance aggression may be directed at people or at other animals.

**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 dog's perception of the situation, not your actual intent, which determines your 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.

**Protective, Territorial And Possessive Aggression:** Protective, territorial and possessive aggressions 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. Dogs 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 dogs, 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 kind of aggressive behavior, because it's motivated by the intent to obtain food, and not primarily by the intent to harm or intimidate.

### **Individual Variation**

The likelihood of a dog to show aggressive behaviour in any particular situation varies markedly from dog to dog. Some dogs tend to respond aggressively with very little stimulation. Others may be subjected to all kinds of threatening stimuli and events and yet never attempt to bite. The difference in the threshold prompting aggressive behaviour 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 behaviour modification techniques, but the potential for change is influenced by a dog's gender, age, breed, general temperament, and the way in which the behaviour modification techniques are chosen and implemented.

Because working with aggressive dogs can be potentially dangerous, behaviour modification techniques should only be attempted by, or under the guidance of, an experienced professional who understands animal learning theory and behaviour.

### **What You Can Do**

- First, check with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behaviour.
- Seek professional advice. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in home help from a professional dog trainer.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep people and other animals safe. Supervise, confine, or restrict your dog's activities until you can obtain professional guidance. You are liable for your dog's behaviour. If you must take your dog out in public, consider a cage-type muzzle as a temporary precaution, and remember that some dogs are clever enough to 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 contact with people.
- If your dog is possessive of toys or treats, or territorial in certain locations, prevent access and you'll prevent the problem. 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 behaviour.

### **What NOT to Do**

- Punishment won't help and, in fact, will often 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 dominant aggressive dog may actually lead him to escalate his behaviour 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 behaviour. Rough housing with your dog can lead to a dominance aggression problem. When dogs are encouraged to "go get 'em" or to bark and dash about in response to outside noises or the approach of a person, territorial and protective aggressive behaviour may result.

### **At the Calgary Humane Society we offer a reactive dog class called Reactive Rover.**

Reactive Rover is for dogs aged 6 months and over with known aggression or reactivity issues. This concern will be addressed through learning how dogs communicate, examining your relationship with your dog, teaching appropriate behaviour and rewarding it.

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