

How to Recognize & Respond to Dog Aggression

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Many dog owners are bewildered when they hear their dog growl, bark, or take an aggressive stance. Unfortunately, many of these animals end up in shelters because the owners could no longer live with the dog. Would you give up on your child that easily?

Of course not! When a baby is brought home to his new family, everyone understands that the baby is learning your language and teaching you his. We begin to understand our child's cry or garbled sounds because we focus on trying to understand him.

Your dog has his own language as well. Understanding dog aggression and your dog's language will help prevent undesirable behavior and dog bites.

Let's begin our understanding of dog aggression with the acronym **DOG BITES**:

- Dominant
- Opportunity
- Game
- Boy/Girl
- Injury
- Territorial
- Escape

Dominant aggression

...is also known as competitive aggression. It is brought on when one dog feels challenged for his social position by another dog (or human). Dogs are pack animals. Social order helps feed and protect the pack.

The dog with the highest social order is called the alpha dog. The alpha dog gets all the perks such as eating whatever he wants, sleeping wherever he wants, and dictating to the others in the pack. He decides when the others get to eat and sleep.

Even owners of a single dog may observe dominant aggression since the dog sees the owner as a member of his pack. An example of this type of aggression is demonstrated by the dog who lays on a favorite chair and growls at the owner when told to get down.

The aggression is a challenge for social position and dibs for the seating arrangement. How the owner reacts to the challenge determines whether the dog becomes more aggressive or submissive in the situation.

Here is a less obvious challenge to an owner's dominance in the pack:

You are sitting in the living room watching television. Your dog comes up to you and slides his head under your hand. You think your dog is adorable and wants your attention, so you pet him as requested.

Here is the punch line to this situation. Petting is similar to licking. Submissive, less dominant dogs in the pack lick the more dominant dogs. In other words, you were challenged and responded with an ok to be the submissive of the challenge.

Petting (or licking) behavior does not always signify submissiveness. There are other situations when dogs lick, but we will not pursue that topic here. What we will offer here is a suggestion on how to respond to the situation above.

Gently cup your hand over your dog's muzzle. Rub behind his ears with a little pressure. These actions closely resemble social order biting. Dominant dogs bite the ears, nose, and neck areas of less dominant dogs to keep them in line. Just watch a mother dog with a litter of pups! You will see the behavior right away.

Opportunity aggression

...is aggression that is intended for another dog or person; however, it is redirected to a closer dog or person because the opportunity to attack is better. An example of this type of aggression is demonstrated when trying to break up two fighting dogs. Sometimes, the person breaking up the fight gets bit.

Caution is the best approach to take with opportunity or redirected aggression. If a dog is agitated, it is better to maintain a safe distance until the dog feels less vulnerable and relaxes.

Game aggression

...is predatory in nature. A dog will chase anything that moves away from it. The dog is a natural hunter of small game. When something runs from a dog, the dog's chase, hunt, capture, and kill instinct takes over.

A human cannot out run a dog. If a dog attacks, the best course of action is to lie down and play dead. This action is a submissive move.

You have probably seen a dog lie down and bear his vulnerable belly to a more dominant dog. He is communicating to the more dominant dog that he is not a threat to the more dominant dog.

Boy/girl aggression

...is all about the hormones! This type of aggression is also known as sexual aggression. The male dog protects his female from other dogs and potential threats to his progeny.

Female dogs, however, also display this sexual aggression when they are pregnant, nursing, or in heat. Even the most docile female may growl or attempt to bite anyone who dares to pick up one of her pups too soon!

Sexual aggression is reduced through spaying and neutering. Most veterinarians recommend spaying or neutering your dog during the 6-12 months of age.

Injury aggression

...is aggression brought on by injury or pain. You might easily see this type of aggression in a dog that has been hit by a car or one who is suffering from age-induced arthritis.

Injury or pain aggression is best handled by seeking medical care for the dog. Try not to touch the painful areas unless absolutely necessary for therapy or to get your dog to safety. Diet, activity, medications, and bedding may help alleviate the pain and therefore, the aggressive behavior.

Territorial aggression

...is aggression displayed to protect the pack's territory. The dog's territory may be much different from your thoughts of the house and backyard. Indeed, if you take him on any walks, he may even consider the whole

neighborhood his territory!

When a dog is in a new environment, he may be "territorial" because he is not sure of his surroundings. This is why a dog that is boarded may be "cage aggressive." The dog is protecting the small territory of the cage from intruders.

When this is the case, let the dog have his space. He is stressed out and will feel protected in his own area.

Territorial aggression may also be used to protect the pack from perceived external threats. A protective dog is one that shows aggression toward other animals or people when he perceives a threat to his owner or other members of the pack.

A dog may also show territorial aggression with possessions. He will protect anything that he perceives as his. This includes food, bedding, toys, affection, and anything else that is part of his world.

Escape aggression

...is also called fear aggression. A dog that is afraid will often shake. The ears will probably be all the way back on the head and the tail will be low. He feels powerless and puts up a fight because he feels trapped like he has no where to escape.

This type of aggression may also be brought on by the fear of punishment. Imagine someone standing much taller than you with his hand raised above his head. Is he going to hit me?

Walking straight toward a dog, giving direct eye contact, or making sudden movements can trigger fear aggression. Always move slowly around dogs that are afraid. Never give direct eye contact or move right towards a fearful dog.

Short note about the author

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