

AGGRESSION TO PEOPLE

REDUCING & MANAGING DOG AGGRESSION TOWARDS PEOPLE

This information is to help you prevent or reduce **mild** aggression only. It is recommended that you consult your veterinarian and a qualified trainer to help you with a dog that is showing aggression towards people. Make sure that your trainer has credentials and knows how to modify fear and aggression in a safe force-free manner. Trainers who use verbal or physical punishment or intimidation should not be used as this can make the problem worse and your dog afraid of you.

RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM

Aggression is a normal canine behaviour. It is normal in all animals. Dogs use aggression to defend themselves from a perceived threat and to protect their valued resources. They also use aggression when they are fearful to try to get the thing that scares them to move away.

Most dogs give off warning signals before they actually bite. These warning signals are good. The dog is telling the person that he feels uncomfortable and to please back away. Respect this warning and maintain distance. It is very, very important not to punish a dog for giving a warning signal.

Dogs punished for growling or other warning signals may not growl next time. Instead they may go directly to a bite.

Common threat signals include: hard eye, growling, snarling, snapping and biting.

Dogs with food guarding issues may also may exhibit the following warning signals: Cessation of eating (freeze) and accelerated eating in addition to the above.

AGGRESSION TOWARDS PEOPLE FALLS INTO 2 TYPES:

- 1) Aggression towards strangers.
- 2) Aggression towards family members.

1) Aggression towards strangers

When a dog is uncomfortable around strangers or certain types of strangers (men, men with beards etc.) it is usually because they were either bred to be guard dogs or they were not fully socialized as a puppy.

When a dog encounters someone they feel uncomfortable around, they want to increase the distance between them and the person. They can either flee or make the person go away by behaving aggressively. The underlying emotion is fear and anxiety.

Some dogs and some breeds are genetically more difficult to socialize. Dogs bred to be guard dogs can be wary of strangers. It is important to realize that dogs cannot tell the difference between a stranger who is a burglar and a stranger who is an old friend of the family.

It is not always possible to transform an unsocialized dog into a dog who loves all people or a guard dog to be friendly to strangers. Management is important in these cases to keep people safe. A dog with a history of aggression or biting can be conditioned to love a muzzle and always wear it when he may encounter the type of person he fears. Even if progress is made and the fear is reduced there is never a 100% guarantee that the dog will never bite again. A muzzle can give a dog freedom to be out in the world and the owner relief from worry that he may bite.

SAFETY TIPS

Never force yourself on an unfamiliar dog. Stand back and face sideways and let him decide whether to approach or not. **Do not** look the dog in the eye or bend over him or pat him on the head. Instead crouch down and look away. If the dog approaches in a friendly way, let him sniff you and then gently rub him on his chest.

Young children should never be left unsupervised with dogs. Do not let your child jump on or bother your dog and always keep them away when a dog is eating or has a favorite bone or toy. It is important to teach your child how to safely interact with dogs.

Reducing fear or anxiety towards strangers

In order to change the underlying fear a dog must be taught that the scary person predicts good things. A qualified trainer will develop a plan to expose your dog slowly and at a distance to the types of people that he fears. The scary person will be consistently paired with a super delicious treat. Overtime, the goal is for the dog to realize that the scary person predicts great things. His underlying emotion changes from fear to happiness at the site of the previously scary person.

Preventing aggression towards strangers

It is wonderful if the puppy or adult dog that you adopt is friendly to strangers. However you can help to prevent future aggression towards people by pairing people of all types, with good things for your dog. When your puppy sees a child, give him a high value treat. When he sees a person with a cane, give him a treat. Ask strangers to give your dog treats. This teaches your dog that while he used to only like meeting new people, now he loves it because new people predict great things for him.

2) Aggression towards family members

The 3 most common reasons a dog shows aggression towards family members are:

1. Resource Guarding
2. Body Handling Issues
3. Pain or illness

Resource Guarding

This occurs because some dogs have retained the guarding instinct from their wolf ancestors. Dogs may guard food, locations, people or other objects such as toys or even unusual items such as kleenex. It is important to understand that resource guarding has nothing to do with the dog trying to be dominant over you. They simply have a strong inborn instinct to guard.

Reducing food or object guarding

Do not take this personally. Your dog is not doing this to upset or dominate you. He is doing it because he cannot help it. Teach your dog to enjoy having things taken from him by feeding him in a separate area and do not allow anyone to go near him when he is eating. Remove the food bowl at non-meal times as some dogs guard an empty bowl.

Make a list of items that he has guarded and be careful of controlling access to those things. Never try to forcefully remove something from a dog, as this can result in a bite. If your dog grabs something that is not dangerous simply ignore him. If he grabs something that is either dangerous or valuable, go to the fridge and get a handful of very high value of food. Throw the food far away from where the dog is with the guarded object. When he goes to eat the food calmly pick up the guarded item.

If you have a dog who guards food or items put him in a crate or in another room if children come to visit. There can be tragic consequences if a child drops a piece of food and goes to grab it at the same time as the dog. Do this even if you have completed the training and you can safely remove items from your dog. Consider him always a risk of guarding around children and visitors.

Prevention of food and object guarding

If you adopt and the dog is fine with you taking things from them, this is great. You can add an extra measure of safety by regularly trading whatever your dog has for something even better and then return the item to the dog.

The steps to prevent guarding are:

Food Guarding

- 1) Walk up to dog
- 2) Remove food bowl
- 3) Drop in a piece of a really yummy treat
- 4) Return food bowl

Item Guarding

- 1) Walk up to dog
- 2) Remove bone or toy
- 3) Give a nice treat
- 4) Return item to dog

These preventative measures teach your dog that not only is it ok when you take things from him but it is very, very good for him as he gets something even better. Over time your dog will love it when you take things from him.

Location Guarding

Some dogs have an instinct to guard wherever they are laying down. Dogs may growl or snap when someone approaches them and/or tries to get them to move off the couch or bed.

Teach your dog the “off” cue so he will happily vacate locations. When you have visitors, especially children, do not allow your dog to rest on any furniture as he may guard visitors. Never force your dog off of furniture.

Sleeping Dogs

Some dogs snap and bite if they are suddenly awoken from sleep. If this occurs do not allow him to sleep in your bed and do not touch him when he is sleeping. If you need to wake your dog, call him to you instead of touching him.

Body Handling Issues

The main reason that dogs growl or bite when touched is that they were not handled and taught as puppies that it is ok when humans touch them. Some dogs will be aggressive when someone tries to touch their paws or ears, others are afraid when a person grabs their collar or tries to groom them. The warning signals include a stiffening of the body, a hard stare, growling, snarling, snapping or biting when touched.

You can teach your dog to like being touched and handled. Even dogs who need sedation for nail trims can learn to love having their nails cut.

Prevention of Body Handling Problems

If you adopt a puppy it is important to teach him that it is great when people touch him. Handle all parts of your puppy especially his paws, ears and mouth. Follow each touch with a tasty treat. The puppy will learn to love being handled.

Pain or Illness

If an adult dog who is usually fine being handled and now is suddenly aggressive when being touched contact your veterinarian. Change in behaviour can be a sign of pain or illness.