

Training your dog: Aggressive Behaviour

Aggression is seen from time to time in most dogs, and unless extreme is normal canine behaviour. Dogs will use aggression to resolve a situation when necessary. This may be because of a dispute over pack leadership or relative status, or over territory, or it may be a defensive reaction to a perceived threat to the dog, its owner or another canine companion. The aggression may be directed towards people, other dogs, or other animals or even objects. There are many reasons why a dog may be aggressive, so it is important to understand the dog's motivation in order to be able to successfully control or stop the behaviour.

1. Dominant Aggression

This is characterised by threats or attacks on people known to the dog, typically members of the family. If your dog growls or snaps at any family member you should NOT try to correct this on your own - there is a real risk that you could end up badly bitten. Contact the surgery for advice and an appointment for behaviour therapy.

2. Territorial Aggression

This type of aggression happens only in areas the dog perceives as his own personal territory, usually the house or garden, but sometimes on the route of regular walks if the dog is taken on the same walk every day. The aggression may be directed towards visitors, postmen, paper boys etc, or towards approaching people or dogs while close to home or on routine walks. The dog will usually be aggressive and very hard to control when anyone comes to the door, even turning on the owner when he/she tries to physically restrain him. Territorial dogs are often very aggressive to passers-by etc while in the car. Territorial male dogs spend a lot of time sniffing and leg cocking to scent mark their territory. Territorial aggression is usually linked to dominant behaviour generally, and again, you should seek advice and help by means of behaviour therapy.

3. Inter-male Aggression

Male dogs that square up to and attack other male dogs while being passive or friendly to bitches are usually quite dominant and motivated by an instinctive need to "see off" an opponent. The simple solution is castration, although the degree of success depends to a certain extent on the age of the dog; the younger the dog, the greater the likelihood of success. Dogs that have been beating up other males for years are less likely to respond to castration on its own, as there is a learned component to the behaviour. Behaviour therapy in conjunction with castration is likely to be effective.

4. Aggression between Dogs or Bitches in the same House

This is nearly always caused by disputes over pack leadership and may happen without apparent warning, between two or more dogs or bitches who otherwise co-habit quite happily. Fights nearly always occur when the owner is present and range from a quick scuffle to all out warfare. Bitches are generally worse than dogs and harder to sort out. Because of the complexity of family relationships, behaviour therapy should ALWAYS be sought. On no account should you castrate or spay the apparent aggressor without expert advice first - neutering the wrong one can have disastrous effects and is irreversible! Contact the surgery to arrange behaviour therapy as soon as possible - the longer this problem is allowed to persist, the worse it is likely to get.

5. Nervous Aggression

This occurs when the dog feels threatened and unable to escape. Early signs of this can be seen in puppies and young dogs which hang back and appear reluctant to approach strange people, dogs or objects. If forced into confrontation, held on the lead and unable to escape, the nervous dog will growl or snap to deter the person or dog it is afraid of. This inevitably results in the threatening individual withdrawing, rewarding and reinforcing the behaviour. Next time, the dog is more confident that a show of aggression will have the desired effect, and it is not long before he starts to lunge towards anything he sees as threatening, barking, snarling and making a show of being brave and fierce, when in reality the last thing he actually wants is a confrontation. Nervous aggressive dogs are typically worse when on the lead or when meeting a person or dog in a narrow space, but may be fine off lead in an open area where there is plenty of room.

Sometimes it is possible to pinpoint the exact cause of the behaviour. Typically the dog that attacks other dogs regardless of sex, or specific types or sizes of dog may have been attacked himself, or been played with roughly by another dog while still very young.

Nervous aggressive dogs are usually defending themselves. However, if they also perceive themselves as high ranking relative to their human family, they may also be defending their "pack." This makes it difficult for the owner to take control, as the pack leader is responsible for the safety of other pack members, and a "pack leader" type of dog will take no notice of its owner when threatened. For these dogs, training in conjunction with behaviour therapy is indicated in order to help the dog look to its owner for protection rather than handling the situation itself.

Occasionally nervous aggression can be directed towards family members and may be mistaken for dominant aggression. If the dog is over chastised, hit or sometimes even just shouted at, and training methods focus on punishment rather than reward, the dog may become aggressive in self defence. If this is the case, stop ALL punishment and use reward based training - there are many books on the subject, and we can give advice at the surgery.

6. Predatory Aggression

Strictly speaking, this is not aggression, but instinctive behaviour inherited through millions of years of carnivorous evolution. However, it is often interpreted as aggression. Dogs that chase and, if able to catch, bite or snap at cats, small dogs, rabbits, birds, sheep, small children, joggers, cyclists or moving vehicles are usually responding to instinct. The behaviour is triggered by movement - a running child or jogger, a rabbit, cat or sheep running away.

Curing Aggression

It is important to identify the motivation for the aggression, and the above notes may provide some clues. A simple rule which often (although not always) works is to compare the dog's behaviour on and off the lead. If he is worse on the lead, he is probably nervous. If he is worse off the lead then he is probably behaving in a dominant or territorial fashion. If he is aggressive to family members he is likely to be behaving as "pack leader" and behaviour therapy is ESSENTIAL to prevent injury to owners, and in some cases other people.

In all cases when the dog is on the lead, try to avoid tightening the lead in anticipation or response to his behaviour. Your own tenseness is transmitted down a tight lead and the dog will instantly become alert and more likely to react. In addition, tightening the lead reminds a nervous dog that he cannot escape, and he will be more defensive - a tight lead also reassures the nervous dog that his bluff is not going to be called, because his owner has a firm hold on him, and he knows from experience that he is not going to be allowed to make contact!

1. Eye Contact

Eye contact is seen as challenging and threatening by dogs. Both nervous and dominant dogs will be more aggressive if the person they are barking at looks directly at them. Ensure that your friends and people you meet understand this. A slightly sideways stance and eyes looking away from the dog is far less threatening than standing squarely facing and staring at the dog. A nervous dog will be reassured and a dominant dog will feel less challenged by this body language.

2. Using a Halti

When a dog is aggressive to another dog, you will see that he is making piercing eye contact at the same time. To stop the aggression, you need to break that eye contact. This is very difficult to do using a collar and lead when the dog is pulling and lungeing. The Halti is a headcollar designed for dogs which is used to control dogs that pull. It is equally useful for controlling aggressive behaviour on the lead, as it enables you to turn the dog's head away, breaking the challenging eye contact. This has a calming effect on most dogs, and even if they fight the action of the halti, you are still in control. Dominant dogs can be held firmly on the halti with the head facing away as they pass the person or dog they are reacting to. For nervous dogs, it is more effective to turn the dog away from the threat and then encourage him to follow you away from it, by walking in the opposite direction, or crossing the road. Done consistently, this gradually teaches him that there are other alternatives to aggression when faced with a threat - he can choose to walk away.

3. Distraction

Playful dogs can sometimes be distracted by a toy and taught to play in the vicinity of things to which they become aggressive. Play with the dog while dogs, people etc are visible but sufficiently far away for him not to react. Gradually increase his tolerance by playing with him closer and closer. Then use the toy as a distraction when unexpectedly meeting people/dogs etc when out

4. Instant Down

Teaching an instant response to the command "Down" can have a dramatic effect, enabling you to stop the dog in its tracks if it races towards another individual! This can be particularly useful for predatory behaviour. Work on improving the dog's recall response and obedience generally is also helpful.

5. Socialising and Desensitisation

Once you are able to control the behaviour, the dog should be taught to behave calmly in the presence of the person, dog etc that he behaves aggressively towards. For safety's sake the dog should be muzzled, especially when running off the lead. For nervous dogs all contact should be positive, with the use of titbits and games as reward for good behaviour, and it is essential to progress slowly and not put the dog under pressure. Behavioural advice and help is available at the surgery.

6. To chastise or not

Generally, as with all dog training, it is better to reward good behaviour and ignore bad behaviour. However, if the dog is not nervous, there is nothing wrong with a quick check on the lead and a firm "No" provided you can at the same time stop the behaviour in a positive way. It is equally important to really go overboard with your praise and reward the instant he responds.

On NO account must you shout at or otherwise chastise a nervous dog for his behaviour - this just adds to the stress he is feeling, and can make the problem worse. Stop all punishment, and use a halti and evasive action instead as described above, and really lavish praise and reward when he responds.

This information has been compiled by Sarah Coton, Head Veterinary Nurse and Canine Behaviour Consultant at our Warwick centre. Further advice is available by appointment.