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Dog Behavior Problems – Aggression to Family Members – Introduction and Safety

Why might my dog behave aggressively toward me?

There are multiple reasons that a dog may exhibit aggression toward family members. The most common causes include conflict aggression, fear-based, defensive aggression, status related aggression, possessive aggression, food guarding aggression and redirected aggression. Living with a dog that is aggressive to family members may be difficult, dangerous, disappointing and frustrating (see Aggression – Diagnosis and Overview).

Should I keep a dog that is aggressive toward family members?

There are many wonderful reasons to share your life with a pet. They provide companionship, share experiences, nurture, amuse and enrich our lives so the decision to share your life with a dog that is aggressive to you cannot be taken lightly. The ability to provide safety for people who will be around the dog has to be an overriding factor in the decision. In some households' family composition, daily obligations and other issues may make keeping and rehabilitating an aggressive dog unrealistic and dangerous. Placement in another home may sometimes be an option but often a suitable home is not readily available. Euthanasia for aggression is the only guarantee a dog will not be aggressive again.



How do we assess the risk of keeping an aggressive dog?

According to the CDC, 800,000 people seek medical attention for dog bites each year, half of which are children (see Aggression – Children). Dog bites are not rare; these are common events that occur in normal family's lives and it is estimated that 15% of dog owners have been bitten by their own dog. Once a dog bites, he has shown his willingness to use biting as a behavioral strategy at least in that situation and therefore is more likely to bite. Dogs that are willing to use aggression to change the outcome of a situation are rarely cured again. The severity of a bite may be assessed by careful consideration of the situation, the damage caused by the bite, the choices the dog made including the dogs willingness to avoid escalation to a bite by growling, snarling or snapping and the diagnosis of type of aggression. Complex cases may require the experience of a board certified veterinary behaviorist to evaluate and prioritize this assessment.

Aren't all bites the same?

While all bites should be considered serious; the circumstances and choices the dog made during the episode may give some indication as to the options the dog considered before using aggression. In general, most dogs have good control of the intensity and force of their biting.

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Some bites are inhibited and may leave no marks on the skin. Other bites may bruise, pinch, or indent the skin without creating bleeding. More intense bites break the skin, puncture wounds may be superficial or deep, multiple punctures may be present or tearing/shearing injuries may result. Some dogs may bite hard enough to crush bones. Some dogs bite once and withdraw, others bite multiple times within the same episode. Some dogs bite when threatened and when in close proximity; other dogs charge from across the room.

How do we avoid aggression and keep family members safe?

Safety and prevention of bites is the essential first step; both in keeping family members safe and in beginning the process of behavior modification. First, identify all situations that might lead to aggression and prevent access to these circumstances (by caging or confinement, muzzle, or environmental manipulation) or otherwise control the dog when a confrontational situation might arise (e.g., leash and head halter control, tie down). Then it is essential that these situations are avoided to prevent further injury and learning. Although the long-term goal would be to reduce or eliminate the potential for aggression in these situations, each new episode could lead to injury and further aggravation of the problem. A head collar and leash is a good way to control and prevent aggression even inside the home. A properly fitted basket muzzle is even more effective at preventing bites and may be useful in some situations. The dog is unlikely to change his behavior without retraining and the dog learns from each opportunity to practice his aggression; so limit his opportunity for additional aggressive encounters (see Aggression – Getting Started – Safety and Management).

Once the family elects to begin a behavior modification program for aggression, their ability to keep people safe and prevent aggressive episodes must be reevaluated constantly. If there are frequent safety lapses, accidental bites or new bites occurring in new and unforeseen circumstances then the decision to keep and treat this dog must be reassessed.

Don't we just need to show our dog that we are alpha or dominant for the aggression to stop?

Aggression toward family members is not likely to be related to dominance or social status. This is a common misconception, which can lead to inappropriate treatment strategies and perhaps worsening of the aggressive behavior. Most often a dog's aggression is motivated by fear, anxiety, conflict about what to expect and what to do and the anticipation of possible punishment (see (Aggression – Diagnosis and Overview, (Dominance, Alpha, and Pack Leadership – What Does It Really Mean?, and Canine Communication – Interpreting Dog Language). It follows that if underlying anxiety and fear is causing aggressive responses then training programs designed to enforce the human family members as alpha or dominance using confrontation or intimidation-based interventions will increase rather than decrease anxiety and associated aggressive responses. Strategies designed to achieve pack leadership, alpha or dominance over your dog do not address the underlying problem; the fear or anxiety and lack of understanding of what to expect or how to react in the situation. While control and consistent interactions with the pet are desirable, they should be achieved in non-confrontational ways that decrease anxiety and conflict not increase those underlying emotions.

What can be done for my dog's aggression?

A thorough history and assessment of aggressive episodes and your dog's behavioral history are essential for a proper diagnosis and treatment plan. See www.AVSABonline.org for guidelines when selecting someone to help you with your pet's behavior problem. A behavior modification program will generally include avoidance of triggers, teaching new responses,

positive reinforcement for desirable behaviors, control with a head halter and leash, training exercises for response substitution and desensitization for the dog's significant triggers (see Behavior Consultations – Seeing a Behaviorist, Getting Started, Diagnosing a Behavior Problem – Is It Medical or Behavioral?, and Aggression – Introduction).

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How do I gain effective control of my dog?



It is important that family members set themselves up as good parental leaders very early in their relationship with their dog. Good leaders for dogs treat their dogs more like a good parent would treat children or a good teacher would treat a student. As a pet owner, it is important to provide consistency, patience, persistence, routine and predictability. Rewards for desirable behaviors provide information for the dog and this serves as a guide for the dog's interactions with you. Becoming the leader or being "in control" does not imply harshness or punishment, but that the dog's behavior is appropriate and will continue to be appropriate. This is accomplished with reward based training, physical control devices and supervision. Consistent responses reduce your dog's anxiety and conflict, by teaching your dog what

behaviors will get rewards and what will not. In a sense you gain control over your dog's behavior while your dog gains control over its rewards by "offering you" the behaviors you want it to learn. (see Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards). The individual temperament and genetic predisposition of the puppy will determine the methods needed by the owner to become the leader, because some puppies are more assertive, excitable, fearful, easily distracted, or difficult to motivate and therefore more difficult to train (see Training Basics – Getting Started, Aggression – Diagnosis and Overview, Behavior Management Products, Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards, Learning, Training, and Modifying Behavior, and Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training, as well as handouts on how to train specific commands).

It is equally important to recognize deference when it occurs. When your dog looks away, lowers its head or avoids you, especially when you are reprimanding it, this is deference, appeasement and submission and an attempt to end the encounter (see Canine Communication – Interpreting Dog Language). From the dog's perspective, the encounter is over and if the human persists with reprimands or punishment, the dog may respond with fear and defensive behaviors. Remember, just because the dog defers once does not mean he will in another setting. Each context is separate and the dog's desire for the resource in question figures into the response.

How can I treat my dog's aggression?

Treatment programs will begin by teaching the dog what you DO want him/her to do. This is generally achieved with a positive reinforcement based training program. Tasks taught will vary for the individual dog and situation but may include teaching a dog to go to a confinement area on cue, sit and stay for treats or get off/on furniture on command (see Reinforcement and Rewards, Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards, and Working for Food). Control devices such as head halters and leashes facilitate control and safety without harsh, firm corrections while limiting opportunities for aggression to occur (see Training Products – Head Halter Training and Training Products – Head Halter Training – Synopsis).

Advanced exercises can begin once safety and aggression avoiding measures are in place and basic control tasks have been learned. Behavior modification strategies for specific problematic interactions include: classical counter-conditioning, desensitization and exposure gradients such that the dog is not overwhelmed to the point of aggression or defensiveness

but instead is slowly exposed to previously arousing stimuli at such low levels the arousal does not occur and then rewarded for the proper response. Simultaneously, the dog is responsible for following new commands and rewarded generously for making new, appropriate decisions.

What can be done if my dog refuses to obey my commands?

It is essential that the owner avoid any confrontation or situation that might lead to injury or where the owner may not be able to safely gain control. It may be possible to set up situations and the environment so that the dog must comply. It is counterproductive to "force" or confront your dog, as this could lead to resistance and aggression. Instead, in each situation evaluate whether or not compliance can be achieved. If not, do not proceed; instead, change the situation so that you can successfully get the outcome you desire. As mentioned, you can achieve more immediate control if the dog is fitted with a remote leash and head halter that can then be used to take the dog for walks and is left attached when the dog is indoors and the owner is at home (except for bedtime). Each time the dog is given a command that is not obeyed the leash and head halter can be used to get the desired response. Although the head halter and remote leash is an excellent means of ensuring success and physical control, you have not succeeded until the dog will respond to the verbal commands without the need for leash pulls.

What is the prognosis for dogs that show aggression toward their family?

Dogs that are willing to use aggression to change the outcome of a situation are rarely cured but often can be controlled. Improvement may occur by having predictable interactions, avoidance of aggression provoking stimuli, a good daily routine of exercise, play and social interaction. However, some dogs may continue to be aggressive toward family members and present a risk to those who live with them. Certain family situations may make it impossible to safely rehabilitate an aggressive dog and keep people from harm. Each case requires an assessment with a veterinary behaviorist and ongoing follow up to determine if progress is being made (see Aggression – Introduction and Aggression – Getting Started – Safety and Management).

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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