

What You Should Know About The Kinds Of Dog Aggression

Animals that live in groups have to be able to communicate in order to cooperate and avoid disputes. Communicating involves a set of postural and facial signals that indicate the animal's mood and intent. **Affiliative (Friendly) Behavior** decreases the social distance between participants in an interaction. A relaxed body, rapid tail wag, jumping, whimpering, barking in a playful way and a "happy face" are characteristics of affiliative behavior. Aggressive behavior is also a part of normal social behavior. Dogs have choices to make as to how to react when social conflict presents itself. These choices are termed **agonistic (social conflict) behaviors**. One choice a dog can make when he feels threatened or challenged is to avoid the social conflict by fleeing. Avoidance behaviors include backing away or trying to escape. Another choice a dog can make is to display submissive behaviors in order to turn off or inhibit a threat. Active submission is expressed by ears flattened or pulled back, tail tucked, eye contact avoided (looks away), body turned away, eyes dilated, and whining or high pitched vocalizations. Passive submission is expressed by the dog rolling onto its back, exposing its abdomen and sometimes urinating. A third choice a dog can make is to threaten. Threatening behavior is a warning that if the recipient doesn't stop what he is doing, a bite could happen. Threatening behavior is expressed by barking, growling, staring, showing teeth, lunging, snapping, and inhibited bites. The last choice a dog can make when it is threatened or challenged is to act aggressively.

What is aggressive behavior?

Aggressive behavior has the intent to do harm to another. Animal behaviorists generally discriminate two kinds of aggressive behaviors, offensive and defensive. **Offensive aggression** is expressed by lunging, chasing, and moving toward the opponent. The dog's body postures make him appear larger and more intimidating by standing up tall with a stiff body, orienting towards the opponent and raising the hair on the back. His tail is straight up in a vertical line and may be wagging slowly. The dog's ears are up and forward or pricked forward. There is direct eye contact or staring, teeth are bared and he may be barking and/or growling. **Defensive aggression** is when the dog is protective or fearful. He may hold his position or move away. His body is crouched, the hair on his back may be raised, and he is usually not directly oriented toward the opponent. His tail is usually down, ears pinned back and he may look away from his opponent, or alternate between staring and avoidance of eye contact. The dog's teeth may be bared and he may be growling, barking or whining and whimpering. Ambivalent behavior is when the dog has mixed motivations, and displays both offensive and defensive behaviors such as staring with ears flattened or crouched body posture and lunging. When the dog has not yet decided what to do, he may engage in displacement behaviors such as licking, yawning, scratching, and/or sneezing.

What are the different types of aggressive behavior?

Dominance Aggression is motivated by a challenge to the dog's social status or to his control of a social interaction. Dogs are social animals and view their human families as their social group. If the dog perceives one of his family members or other dogs have challenged him, he may threaten or attack. Challenges may occur over a preferred resting spot, food or toys. Even hugging or reaching over the dog may cause the dog to respond aggressively. Dominance aggression is the reasons for fighting between family dogs. Sometimes one dog is bullying the other dog by following it around and instigating fights even though the other dog is being submissive and trying to avoid confrontation. Dominance aggression is most commonly seen in males between the ages of 18-36 months (See What You Should Know About Dominance Aggression). It is an offensive type of aggression. **Possessive Aggression** is when the dog is defending a valuable object such as a bone, a toy, or a favored sleeping place such as a couch. Possessive aggression may have offensive or defensive components. Sometimes dominance and possessive aggression will overlap. **Territorial Aggression** is when the dog is attempting to defend his perceived property, the house, the yard or even a regularly walked path. The dog may be so motivated to get at the intruder that he jumps fences or goes through windows and doors. The owner may or may not be present. Territorial aggression has mostly offensive components but may have defensive components as well. **Protective Aggression** is when the dog is attempting to protect you or himself from a real or a perceived threat such as a stranger or another dog. It has mostly offensive components. Possessive, territorial and protective aggression are similar forms of aggression and may overlap each other. **Pain induced aggression** is a defensive reaction in response to pain or discomfort when handled in certain ways or from a medical problem or physical injury. **Fear aggression** is a defensive type of aggression. The dog is afraid of unfamiliar people and/or animals or has had a less than pleasant experience, lack socialization or is genetically predisposed to fearful behavior. The dog tries to leave by escaping (backing up, jumping) or tries to hide (under tables, chairs, behind owner) and may attack if he feels he cannot get away from the thing scaring him. He may also attack when the threat is retreating from him. The fearful dog tries to make himself look small by crouching or ducking his head. He may freeze or quiver, his ears are back, tail tucked and his eyes are dilated and the whites of his eyes show. **Inter-male/inter-female aggression** is offensively motivated and occurs when the dogs are competing over a resource such as mates, food, or space. This is just another name for dominance, possessive, territorial or protective aggression to other dogs. **Maternal aggression** is when the female perceives her offspring are threatened and can be offensive or defensive. **Redirected aggression** can be offensively or defensively motivated and occurs when the primary target of aggression is inaccessible. Redirected aggression generally arises out of another form of aggression. For example, two family dogs may attack each other when they can't get to a dog outside their fence or a dog may attack another dog if his owner has just punished him. **Idiopathic aggression** is severe aggressive behavior that appears to be unprovoked, and is unpredictable and uncontrolled. It could be a result of a medical condition or be connected with dominance aggression. **Play aggression** is often seen in puppies and young dogs and there is no intent to do harm. Although, grabbing, nipping and biting may result in injury to people or damage to clothing. Play aggression

has many of the same behaviors seen in **predatory behavior** such as stalking, chasing, pouncing, shaking, and biting. However, the goal of predatory behavior is to obtain food. Play behavior may be a combination of one or more of the above types of aggression.

Why do some dogs become aggressive?

The causes of aggression are poorly understood but it is known that genetic predispositions, hormones, biological influences such as age, sex, reproductive status (intact vs. spayed/neutered), and overall health affect aggressive behavior. Genetic predispositions may lead some dogs to have a low bite threshold and a high tolerance for pain. Some dogs may have had unpleasant or inadequate experiences as puppies or later in life. A dog learns what works to make unpleasant things go away. Barking at the delivery person makes him go away; growling at the stranger who is reaching to pet him makes the stranger back off. Aggression can increase when it works for the dog.

What to do

Your first responsibility is to protect people and other dogs from an aggressive dog. Keep an aggressive dog separated from others or muzzle him when he must be around others. Consult your veterinarian. The aggressive behavior could have medical causes. In some cases, medications prescribed by your veterinarian may be helpful. You may be able to manage aggression problems by changing the environment or your dog's activities. For example, if your dog is aggressive around his food, feeding him away from others will prevent the aggression. Management doesn't resolve aggression problems. Behavior modification can be helpful in many cases, but it must be done carefully or it can make the problem worse. You will probably need the help of an experienced, qualified behavior consultant to help you work with the problem. At our website you will find a wellness report entitled "Guidelines for Choosing a Dog Trainer or Behavior Consultant." You will also find other wellness reports that provide more information about the different kinds of aggression and their treatment. At our website you can find out how to schedule a consultation with us to help you resolve your dog's problem. Not all aggression problems can be managed or resolved. In severe cases or cases where others cannot be protected, euthanasia of the dog should be considered.

What not to do

Don't ignore threatening or aggressive behavior. Aggression problems rarely get better on their own. Aggressive dogs can be dangerous. Don't punish aggressive behavior, unless it is part of a behavior modification plan directed by a qualified behavior consultant. Punishment usually makes aggression worse. Aggressive behavior is not due to a lack of obedience training. Obedience training by itself will not help.