

Canine Predatory Aggression
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It probably seems to most of us that chasing a squirrel, cat or other small animal is a very canine thing to do. Certainly wolves, the ancestors of dogs, chase small and large animals and kill and eat them. In more recent times people have selectively bred dogs for various aspects of their predatory behavior.

Terriers were bred to chase and catch small burrowing animals such as rats; behavior which includes all the components of predatory behavior excepting eating. Herding breeds such as shelties and Australian shepards were bred to chase and round-up livestock.

In this instance, the predatory behavior has been selectively changed to not including hurting or killing the “prey”. In the sporting breeds, predatory behavior was modified to focus on finding and retrieving game rather than chasing and killing.

The hounds were also bred for hunting, some by sight such as the greyhound, and some by smell such as the dachshund. The intended prey of hounds varied from elk for the Irish wolfhound, to the badger for the dachshund. With this evolutionary history it shouldn't be surprising that most dogs are excited by the movement of small animals, inanimate objects like balls and flying disks and any other item that sounds or moves like prey.

While most dogs like a good game of fetch, which can be wonderful fun, more than a few dogs like to chase other animals, runners, or people on bikes or in-line skates. At best this behavior is a nuisance and at worst it can be dangerous.

Animal behaviorists don't know why some dogs are more interested in chase behavior than others. Genetic predispositions, early experiences and even later learning may all play a role.

Chasing behavior is obviously dangerous if it ends with the dog biting or nipping. However, dogs who are just chasing are also dangerous because the objects of the chase may be injured trying to escape. If you are being chased by a dog, it's very difficult to tell before hand if he is going to bite you if he catches you! The chasing dog may be a danger to itself by running onto a busy street.

With the exception of trained and properly supervised hunting and working dogs, the chasing of people and other animals should never be encouraged because it may lead to more serious behavior. Dogs who are prone to chasing behavior should be prevented from doing so and professional help from an animal behaviorist should be sought.

Just because this behavior is “natural” for many dogs, does not mean that it cannot and should not be changed. In some cases predatory chasing can be stopped with carefully implemented behavior modification.

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