

Aggressive Behavior In Dogs

Call the 'Adopters Only' Hotline at 942-7297 or visit www.hawaiianhumane.org for more advice & Information.



Growling, baring teeth, snarling, snapping and biting are all meant to intimidate or harm a person or another animal. Although aggressive behaviors are normal for dogs, they're generally unacceptable to humans. From a dog's perspective, there's always a reason for aggression. Since humans and dogs have different communication systems, misunderstandings can occur. A person may intend to be friendly, but a dog may perceive that person's behavior as threatening or intimidating.

We recommend that you get professional in-home help from an animal behavior specialist to deal with aggression. If there has been a sudden change in your dog's behavior or if your dog hasn't been to the veterinarian lately, take your dog to the vet first, to rule out any medical problems that could be triggering the behavior.

Types Of Aggression

Dominance Aggression

Dominance aggression is motivated by a challenge to a dog's social status or to his control of a social interaction. Dogs are social and their human families are part of their pack. Based on the outcomes of social challenges among group members, a dominance hierarchy is established.

If your dog perceives his own ranking in the hierarchy to be higher than yours, it's likely that he'll challenge you. Since people don't always understand canine communication, you may inadvertently challenge your dog's social position. A dominantly aggressive dog may growl if he is disturbed when resting or sleeping, or if he is asked to give up a favorite spot, such as the couch or the bed. Physical restraint – even a friendly hug – may also cause your dog to respond aggressively. Reaching for your dog's collar or reaching over his head could also be interpreted as a challenge for dominance. Dominantly aggressive dogs are often described as "Jekyll and Hydes" because they can be very friendly when not challenged. Dominance aggression may be directed at people or at other animals. The most common reason for dogs in the same

family to fight with each other is instability in the dominance hierarchy.

Fear-Motivated Aggression

Fear-motivated aggression is a defensive reaction and occurs when a dog believes he is in danger of being harmed. Remember that it's your dog's perception of the situation, not your actual intent, which determines your dog's response. For example, you may raise your arm to throw a ball, but your dog, perceiving this to be a threat, may bite you because he believes he is protecting himself from being hit. A dog may also be fearfully aggressive when approached by other dogs.

Protective, Territorial And Possessive Aggression

Protective, territorial and possessive aggression are all similar and involve the defense of valuable resources.

Territorial aggression is usually associated with defense of property. However, your dog's sense of territory may extend well past the boundaries of his house and yard. For example, if you walk your dog regularly around the neighborhood and allow him to urine-mark, he may think the entire block is his territory.

Protective aggression is usually directed toward people or animals that a dog perceives as a threat to his family or pack.

Dogs become possessively aggressive when defending food, toys or other valued objects, such as an item stolen from the trash.

Redirected Aggression

This type of aggression is relatively common, but is a behavior that pet owners may not always understand. If a dog is aggressively aroused by a person or animal that he is prevented from attacking, he may redirect this aggression onto someone else. A common example occurs when two family dogs bark and growl in response to another dog passing through their front yard. The two dogs, confined

behind a fence, may turn and attack each other because they can't attack the intruder. Predation is usually considered a unique kind of aggressive behavior because it's motivated by the intent to obtain food, not primarily to harm or intimidate.

Individual Variation

Some dogs respond aggressively with very little stimulation. Others may be subjected to all kinds of threatening stimuli and events, and never attempt to bite. The difference in this threshold at which a dog displays aggressive behavior is influenced by previous experiences, environmental and genetic factors. If his threshold is low, a dog is more likely to bite. Raising the threshold makes a dog less likely to respond aggressively.

This threshold can be raised using behavior modification. How easily the threshold can be changed is influenced by the dog's gender, age, breed, general temperament, and by whether appropriate behavior modification techniques are chosen and correctly implemented. Working with aggressive dogs can be potentially dangerous, and should be done only by, or under the guidance of, an experienced animal behavior specialist who understands animal learning theory and behavior.



What You Can Do

- ❖ Check with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes.
- ❖ Seek professional in-home help from an animal behavior specialist. An aggression problem will not go away by itself.
- ❖ Take precautions. Your first priority is safety. Supervise, confine or restrict your dog's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for your dog's behavior. If you must take your dog out in public, consider a cage-type

muzzle as a temporary precaution, and keep in mind that some dogs can get a muzzle off.

- ❖ Avoid exposing your dog to situations where he is more likely to show aggression. You may need to keep him confined to a safe room and limit his people contact.
- ❖ If your dog is possessive of specific places or objects, don't allow him access to those items. For example, if your dog is possessive of your bed, do not allow him access to the bedroom. When confronted with a situation where your dog has possession of an object he will not give up, it is safer to bribe him with something better than what he has, rather than challenge him. For example, if he steals your shoe, trade him the shoe for a piece of chicken.
- ❖ Spay or neuter your dog. Intact dogs are more likely to display dominance, territorial and protective aggressive behavior. Reduced-rate sterilization certificates redeemable at participating Oahu veterinarians are available through the City's Neuter Now Program. Visit a Satellite City Hall or the Hawaiian Humane Society for a certificate.

What Not To Do

Punishment won't help and can worsen the problem. If the aggression is fear motivated, punishment will make your dog more fearful, and possibly more aggressive. Attempting to punish or dominate a dominantly aggressive dog is likely to cause the behavior to escalate. This may result in a bite or severe attack. Punishing territorial, possessive or protective aggression is likely to elicit defensive aggression.

Don't encourage aggressive behavior. Playing tug-of-war or wrestling games encourages your dog can result in the beginning of a dominance aggression problem. Encouraging your dog to "go get 'em" or to bark and dash about in response to outside noises or at the approach of a person, may result in a territorial and protective response.

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