



DOG FACTS



UNDERSTANDING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN DOGS

Aggression means intent to do harm. The word aggression however can refer to a range of behaviors from barking and growling, snarling and snapping, to biting and attacking. Threats of aggression are one-way dogs have of communicating and are often displayed as a means of avoiding outright aggression. However, a threat (growling or snapping) may escalate to outright aggression (biting) in any given situation.

There are many different reasons for aggression. Because aggression is so complex, and because the potential consequences are so serious, we recommend that you get professional in-home help from an animal behavior specialist if your dog is displaying aggressive behavior.

Phone consultations, including our Behavior Helpline can't assist you with aggressive behavior problems (*see our handout: "When the Behavior Helpline Can't Help"*).

Types of Aggression

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 intent, which determines your dog's response. For example, you may raise your arm to throw a ball, but if your dog perceives this to be a threat, he may show aggressive behaviors to protect himself from being hit.

Possessive Aggression: Possessive aggression involves the defense of valuable resources. Maternal aggression is a specific type of this aggression in which mother dogs become defensive of their puppies. Resource guarding is another type of possessive aggression where dogs defend their food, toys, or other valued objects, such as Kleenex stolen from the trash!

Social Aggression: Animals that live in groups, like dogs, establish relationships through which the individuals involved interact and live together. The roles that the individuals play within the relationship can change

with each new day or situation and can be affected by the presence of various resources, such as food, toys, and attention from people. Social aggression can also occur when there is lack of communication within the relationship. Social aggression can be complex and not best resolved through physical force. Practicing nothing in life is free (*see our handout on this technique*) is a good way to establish a strong stable relationship with your dogs and reduce instability in the home.

Frustration Aggression: Some dogs, if restrained when aroused, excited, or fearful can be aggressive toward the person restraining them or show aggression towards a passing person or animal. A dog being held back by the collar for instance may turn and bite the hand on the collar. A dog may also show aggression towards a person walking by them when they are in a cage, crate, car, or when on a leash. Redirected Aggression is a type of frustration aggression. If a dog is aroused into an aggressive response by a person or animal, he may redirect this aggression onto someone nearby. Owners for instance are often bitten when they try to intervene in a fight between two family dogs.

Another example occurs when there are two family dogs who become excited when a person or dog passes by the yard. The two dogs, which are confined behind the fence, then turn and attack each other because the fence prevented them from getting to the intruder.

Pain-elicited Aggression: An otherwise friendly and social dog may also bite or snap if touched when he is in pain. You may be treating him or attempting to help him, but he perceives any touch from you as potentially painful and snaps or bites to make you go away. If you are working with a dog in pain, it is a good precaution to muzzle the dog. Some training tools that inflict pain, such as prong collars, may provoke a dog to pain-elicited aggression. We do not recommend using tools that cause pain or fear.