

General Information about Aggressive Behavior in Dogs

BASIC FACTS

Most dog to dog and dog to people aggression originates in a lack of social skills (confidence). The number one cause of dog bites to people is fear. The number one human most bitten is a child.

Most backyard dogs have higher incidents of aggression problems due to a lack of socialization and high rates of isolation. Dog are pack animals and need to be indoors with their human families, including sleeping indoors at night-see our web page on the backyard dog at www.hssv.org/behavior/dog/backyard_dog.htm

Unaltered, adult male dogs deliver the most dog bites to humans and have the most dog aggression problems. Neuter your male dog by 6 months of age. Spay your female before her first heat cycle (before 7 months of age).

The ideal time to socialize a dog is between 3 weeks of age up to about 16 weeks. This is a critical time period in a dog's life when he must meet a wide variety of people and other friendly dogs so he grows up confident and not fearfully aggressive. Your puppy should meet at least 100 different people before his 4-month birthday. Socialization should then be continued on a more relaxed basis for the next two years of the dog's life.

All puppies should attend a basic socialization and training class as young as 10 weeks of age and certainly no later than 14 weeks. Puppies should stay with their mother and littermates until they are between 7 and 8 weeks of age. Taking a puppy away earlier from their litter can result in a lack of doggie social skills and bite inhibition.

Adopt/buy only puppies that have been handled by humans since birth. If you are adopting an older dog, adopt/rescue only animals that have been temperament tested by professionals such as a private trainer, shelter or rescue group. Ask to see the written results of the test.

HE'S GROWLING YOU SAY?! BE GLAD YOU AT LEAST HAVE A SIGN...

Growling or becoming "tense" or "stiff" or aloof is a sign of emotional discomfort about a situation. It usually originates because the animal is fearful of a situation and feels it must defend itself. REGARDLESS of our intentions when we are trying to interact with the dog, the dog perceives it as a threat. Unless we take the growl seriously, it does get worse. Look at growling as a signal for help. The dog is telling you the situation is too much for him and he needs your help to defuse the situation and to relearn a new emotional response. However, growling, when it clearly is in play and accompanied by playful body language is not cause for concern.



CAN'T I JUST YELL OR JERK HIM TO FIX IT?

If we punish an animal for giving signs of emotional distress (the growl, the bark), then we will only teach the animal not to growl and thus not to give us valuable information that there is a problem. Most importantly we will have NOT addressed the internal emotional response, the fear, which the dog has in that particular situation. Punishing a growling dog in fact will make the internal fear worse (think about how you feel emotionally when someone yells at you or attempts to hit you when you are already frightened). Eventually the animal bites or attacks without warning because you have taught it not to show signs of discomfort by using punishment. But because nothing has been done to address the emotional distress of the animal, it increases tenfold due to the punishment it receives in those stressful situations.

On the other hand, if we talk to, pet, soothe, make eye contact with etc. an animal that is fearful, you are indeed rewarding the dog for that emotional response to the situation at hand. Treating fearful behavior means that you are trying to change the dog's emotional response to a situation. You want to change it from one of fear (" OH NO!" to "oh goodie, another person/ dog to visit with!"). A private trainer can teach you what to watch for that would indicate the pet is OK with a stranger or another dog. Many dogs will NOT become wonderful social butterflies with other people or dogs even after a great amount of training but they can be trained to at least tolerate walking by another dog or person without lunging or barking. Keep your dog leashed at ALL times when in contact with people or other dogs, including when indoors if you are having an aggression problem.

Do NOT punish your pet in any form (no yelling, scolding, physical pushing/pulling/hitting, etc.) For the time being, avoid any situations in which your pet has growled at anyone or any dog or you have reason to believe that your pet would growl. Do NOT force your pet to interact with any other dogs or people. Do not drag him out from under the bed to meet people. Do not push him away from you so he will go play with other dogs. Do not allow him to meet other dogs or people on leash if he is growling or has other aggressive signs (hackles up, stiff posture, barring teeth, high stiff tail carriage, etc.)

TOOLS TO HELP...

Because aggression, especially directed towards people or other dogs can be very dangerous, do purchase a head collar for your dog and have your pet wear it around the house initially. Head collars come in the brand names of Gentle Leader or Snoot Loop. We don't like the Halti brand, as it does not fit well. Get your dog used to it using tasty food treats. Put the collar on, feed your dog several tasty treats, then take it off and ignore your pet for a time. Then repeat the cycle until your dog is begging for you to put it on. This may take a full week. The head collar should be used with a gentle pull only never a tug. Never let the leash become so long that your pet could bolt forward and then hit the end of the leash in a sharp fashion. A good trainer in your area can help with the fitting and initial training of using a head collar. The head collar will give you a high degree of control without pain to your dog.

Your first goal in treating fear/aggression is keeping the HUMANS safe and the head collar will give you a big edge on that. Your dog can wear the head collar when you need to walk or when other people come over. In the household, the dog can drag a lightweight leash from the regular collar that way you can move your pet quickly and safely should your dog become aggressive.

Muzzling your pet will provide safety to other dogs or people BUT will NOT address/fix the problem. Muzzles should always be used under close supervision and only for short periods of time. Never leave your dog alone with a muzzle on; he could become overheated, be unable to pant to expel heat and then die.

WRITTEN RESOURCES...

"The Cautious Canine "by Patricia McConnell. It is available from www.dogwise.com. Or call 1-800-776-2665. It is a paperback so it is cheap. Do invest it. Another good paperback book is called "Dogs Are From Neptune" and is written by Jean Donaldson. It is also available through Dogwise. Private trainers...

Do hire a private trainer ASAP to help you with any aggressive dog. Unless treated, an aggressive animal can become much worse and will be a huge

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liability problem for you. If you have children in your home or have children that visit, even more the reason to hire a trainer right away. Taking a group class is not advisable, as they are generally not set up to treat aggression problems. You will need a private, in home consultation with a humane trainer to start. With all the bad publicity about aggressive dogs, you need to act on this NOW.

Please go to our web page on finding a humane trainer at:
www.hssv.org/behavior/dog/training_svalley.htm
Or
www.hssv.org/behavior/dog/training_nation.htm

I CAN'T HANDLE IT!! I WILL JUST FIND
FIESTY FIDO ANOTHER HOME THEN ...

Just an additional word of caution for you. If you have an aggressive dog and are thinking about finding him/her another home, think again. You are liable for this dog for the rest of its life because it is an existing problem that you are well aware of. What this means is that even if in the ownership of a new person, if this dog bites someone or some other dog, the new owner or the victim can turn around and sue you; stating that you did not fully disclose that this dog had a problem. Even if you draw up a legal document stating the problems of this dog, you can still be held liable down the road. We know all so well how even legal disclosure documents do not carry much weight even in a court of law. So do address any aggression problem you may have with your pet as soon as possible.

Do get a professional, humane trainer to do an evaluation of your pet to see if the problem is modifiable for your particular lifestyle/situation. Aggression is something that is NOT treatable over the phone or via email. You do need to have someone come in person to evaluate your pet. Don't delay in getting a professional in to help you; modifying aggressive behavior is always much easier if addressed early on instead of months or years later. If you think that it is too costly to hire a private trainer (anywhere from \$150.00 for an initial consultation up to \$1,000.00 for continuing treatment) then compare it to a potential lawsuit which could easily run in the thousands and thousands of dollars.

If you have additional questions, please call our FREE Animal Behavior Help line at :
408/727-3383, ext. 753
Or
use our email at:
http://www.hssv.org/behavior/dog_behavior.htm