

73 Dog Behavior Problems – Aggression

Family Members – Treatment



What is conflict-induced aggression?

Conflict-induced aggression is a term that recently has been used to describe what was previously known as dominance motivated aggression, a term that is overused and may be an inaccurate diagnosis for why the dog is behaving aggressively toward family members. It is important not only to recognize all situations in which aggression might arise, but also why and how the aggression has developed in order to determine the prognosis (the possibility for safe and effective improvement) and to design an appropriate treatment plan.

Aggression toward family members may be due to: fear and anxiety; conflict (i.e., uncertainty or unpredictability as to how the human might respond); defensive responses (as when the pet perceives that it might be punished); possessive behavior (resource holding potential), redirected aggression; or rarely social status aggression. Social status aggression is likely a combination of learned or conflict induced responses or related to impulse control disorders. Assessing the history with respect to the early encounters may help determine underlying motivation even when circumstances or body postures have changed over time.

How might conflict-induced aggression begin?

Puppies that control owner interactions with play biting, barking, or attention soliciting will quickly learn that these are effective behaviors to achieve what they want. Unfortunately, they do not learn that the owners control rewards nor do they learn that deferential, obedient or settled behaviors are how to achieve rewards. This type of assertive and demanding behavior might eventually escalate into increasingly pushy and even aggressive behavior as the puppy learns that this is a successful means of gaining control of resources. Another concern is the conflict (competing motivations) that arises when dogs interact with owners who have inconsistent and unpredictable use of rewards and punishment. A common scenario for causing conflict occurs when family members sometimes give in to the puppy's demands and at other times punish the puppy for the very same behaviors. Pet owners are often inconsistent in their training techniques; using positive reinforcement (rewards) to get desirable behavior and then use varying intensities of punishment when the pet does not respond (e.g., hitting, leash corrections, prong collars). Physical punishment of any type can easily lead to conflict or defensive aggression either at the time or when you attempt to handle your dog in future interactions. Some dogs may aggressively challenge their owners to maintain a favored resource (e.g., sleeping area, toy, or attention of a family member) (see (75) Aggression – Possessive – Objects and Toys and (76) Aggression – Possessive – Food Bowl) and the subsequent withdrawal by the owner leading to a successful outcome. Although when threatened by a dog it is prudent to retreat; over time some dogs may learn that aggressive behavior works and is repeated. Confrontation, punishment, threats or owner fear and anxiety are only likely to make the dog more defensive and anxious over further similar confrontations.

In each of these examples, conflict, fear, possessiveness, or learning, rather than dominance, is the cause of the aggression. However, genetic factors also play an important role in how assertive, pushy, and persistent a dog may act. This may be displayed in situations where an owner attempts to approach or pet the dog when it is resting or not interested (not in the mood) for social interaction. At these times, rather benign challenges by family members such as trying to pass by, move, sit beside, lie down beside, pet or hug the dog might lead to threats and aggression. Regardless of the cause, the treatment program requires that you create the proper relationship with your dog through the use of proper and consistent application of rewards, physical control devices, cessation of all punishment, and regaining control of resources and reinforcers so that you can teach your dog what is desirable. In some cases, the aggressive displays are so intense and out of proportion to the challenge, that excessive anxiety or a lack of impulse control may be a component of the problem (in which case, drugs might be considered).

How can I determine if conflict/social status aggression is developing?

Early signs of conflict aggression are usually subtle. Dogs mostly use facial expressions and body postures to signal intent. Unwanted encounters between family members and the pet usually begin with prolonged eye contact and maybe growling and/or snarling (lifting of the lip to expose the teeth, usually without noise) over resources such as food, resting places, moving the dog and perhaps handling the body. If the owner sometimes acquiesces but at other times continues the “challenge,” the relationship may be unclear. This can create anxiety for the dog and things may

escalate to snapping, lunging and biting. It will be necessary to determine the context of the aggression such as certain types of petting or handling, approaching when the dog is resting or sleeping, touching the food or toys, discipline or scolding the dog, ability to handle the body, or stepping over the dog. These aggressive displays may not occur in every situation, only those where the dog is more motivated to keep an item, when it is not in the mood for social interactions or if it is fearful and/or defensive (see (48) Canine Communication – Interpreting Dog Language).

The body posture of the dog during the encounter is very important. Most dogs are uncertain in these situations and their body postures and facial expressions will reflect this conflict. They often are averting their eyes, licking their lips, turning away their head and/or body and perhaps crouching down. Although they may also be growling, they are attempting in a dog way to diffuse what they see as a threat rather than continue aggression. It is also possible to have multiple motivations. In fact, as mentioned, many dogs show aggression when they have some degree of fear and anxiety and are uncertain or are in a state of conflict.

Not all of these dogs behave the same and a description of what the dog looks like, how they responded to challenges, and where and with whom they occur are important pieces of information to obtain before making a diagnosis. A dog may only show aggression in limited contexts, say food guarding only, in which case the diagnosis is not conflict aggression, but guarding a highly favored resource; in this case, treatment should be focused on the possessive aggression (see (75) Aggression – Possessive – Objects and Toys and (76) Aggression – Possessive – Food Bowl). Within a family, a dog may show conflict or may challenge some family members while avoiding or deferring to others (see (48) Canine Communication – Interpreting Dog Language and (53) Dominance, Alpha, and Pack Leadership – What Does It Really Mean?).

How the dog behaved during the initial aggressive episodes is likely a better indicator of cause, since with each aggressive event, the dog learns new ways of behaving in that situation or with that person. It is possible for the dog to growl at family members because of fear and, if the person backs away, the pet learns that aggression is a successful way to resolve a social conflict. Over time, with repetition of the same scenario the dog learns that aggression results in a favorable outcome. This may result in a dog that acts confident rather than fearful, but underlying anxiety and fear may be the cause of the aggression. This would result in a different diagnosis; rather than social status aggression, this dog may be exhibiting fear or conflict aggression.

What should I do if I believe that my dog is displaying conflict aggression?

“All aggressive challenges should be taken seriously.”

All aggressive challenges should be taken seriously. Dogs are capable of hurting and inflicting a great deal of damage with their bites. Physically confronting a dog that is acting in an aggressive manner can result in the escalation of the aggression and subsequent injury to humans. When dogs growl, snarl or snap they are showing their intention to use aggression if the stimulus does not retreat and they may escalate their challenge. Therefore, it is important to be able to accurately determine how the dog will behave. All aggressive and potentially aggressive situations should be identified and avoided. The situations and responses are not always predictable. At no time should family members attempt to “out muscle” the dog and force it to obey. This can result in serious human injury. All physical reprimands and punishments must be stopped since they cause fear, anxiety and pain and are very likely to increase rather than decrease aggressive responses.

First, identify all situations that might lead to aggression and prevent access to these circumstances (by caging or confinement, muzzle, or environmental manipulation) or otherwise control the dog when a confrontational situation might arise (e.g., leash and head halter control, tie down). Although the long-term goal would be to reduce or eliminate the potential for aggression in these situations, each new episode could lead to injury and further aggravation of the problem. A head collar and leash is a good way to control the dog inside the home, while a muzzle may be even more effective at preventing bites (see (66) Training Products – Head Halter Training and (98) Muzzle Training).

Second, identify and work to teach the dog how to allow owner control using the rewards that your dog wants to train the behaviors you want your dog to learn. Dogs should not be allowed into areas or onto furniture where they might be possessive, protective or unwilling to obey. It might be best to have a mat or crate where the dog can be left alone when it is resting, sleeping or chewing on its favored toys. When not confined away from potential harm, your dog should be under constant supervision. During training, and when giving commands, ensure that your dog always obeys, and reward compliance immediately. Leaving a leash and head halter attached can help to ensure safety and success. Mouthing, play biting and tug of war games should be avoided. While they might not increase aggression, they get a dog emotionally aroused and they do allow the dog to learn how to use its mouth to control outcomes. **If the dog is not comfortable being confined in any way, then begin with training of positive confinement** (see (61) Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training, (50) Crate Training – Positive Confinement – Why to Crate Train, (51) Crate Training – Guide – How to Crate Train, and (52) Crate Training – Synopsis).

Third, take control of all resources (i.e., treats, attention, and toys) and use them to reward desirable behavior. Like human interactions, we want to have a “please and thank you” system in place with our dogs. When rewards are given on demand, the dog is reinforced for its actions and is in control of when and where the rewards are given. Therefore, if a dog seeks any form of attention, affection, play, or food, the dog must be ignored so that it cannot achieve control over these resources. Make a short list of target behaviors where the dog is calm and deferent and insist on these behaviors before every reward is given (learn to earn). Alternatively, the dog can be taught to settle and relax before receiving rewards. In this way, calm, obedient and deferential interactions are reinforced while anxious, excitable, pushy, mouthy, and attention-seeking behaviors are not. Note that it is the attention seeking behavior that is ignored and not the dog itself. Rewards are most motivating when they have been withheld and are most effective as reinforcers when given **only** for those behaviors you want your dog to learn. In addition, instead of a few short training sessions each day, you can continuously ensure that you respond consistently by having your dog exhibit appropriate behaviors or defer to you every time you would normally give a reward. Some dogs, especially at first may not respond to your command to settle when asked. If they do not obey, you have two options; one would be to ignore your dog or walk away until it is settled. The second would be to find a way to ensure that your dog succeeds, either by using lure training or by leaving a leash and head halter attached. Your dog should learn quickly if you focus on training what behaviors will achieve rewards, and by withdrawing social interaction for undesirable behavior (see (17) Working for Food, (56) Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards, and (57) Learning, Training, and Modifying Behavior). Fourth, reward-based obedience training is essential so that you can quickly and effectively communicate with your dog to get desirable responses rather than punishing undesirable ones. Begin in safe and controlled environments with rewards given for compliance. Work to achieve “come” and “settled” responses (sit/focus, down-settle, go to your mat) on cue (see (61) Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training). Once successful,

these commands should be practiced in a variety of environments and with all family members. Again, use a leash and head halter to ensure success, while controlling the head and mouth. Clicker training can also be a positive and immediate way to shape desirable behavior (see (66) Training Products – Head Halter Training and (56) Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards). The use of training devices that choke or cause pain, such as pinch collars, may exacerbate aggression and increase anxiety rather than settling the dog and increasing owner control (see (68) Training Products – To Choke or Not to Choke).

What is the prognosis for dogs that show aggression toward their family?

“Dogs that are willing to use aggression to change the outcome of a situation are rarely cured.”

Dogs that are willing to use aggression to change the outcome of a situation are rarely cured but often can be controlled. Improvement may occur by having predictable interactions, avoidance of aggression-provoking stimuli, a good daily routine of exercise, play and social interaction. However, some dogs may continue to be aggressive toward family members and present a risk to those who live with them. Certain family situations may make it impossible to safely rehabilitate an aggressive dog and keep people from harm. Each case requires an assessment with a veterinary behaviorist and ongoing follow up to determine if progress is being made (see (72) Aggression – Family Members – Introduction and Safety and (74) Aggression – Getting Started – Safety and Management).