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BC SPCA - Reducing and Managing Dog Aggression Towards People

CAUTION: *The information in this fact sheet is to help you prevent or reduce mild aggression only. Aggression is a serious condition that gets worse over time if not treated. If you are not able to reduce or manage aggression on your own, consult a qualified behaviourist.*

While obedience is an important part of treatment and will help you ensure that you can control your dog's behaviour, it does not address the cause of aggression and will not resolve the problem in the long term. When selecting a dog trainer for your aggressive dog, make sure they understand the underlying emotional factors that are often at the source of aggression. Never use pain or physical punishment to control aggression.

RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM

Aggression is a normal canine behaviour that may or may not involve biting. Dogs use aggressive and submissive body language to communicate with other dogs and people about various things. Aggression is a problem when it becomes the method of communication a dog chooses to use with people. While some dogs may bite and cause injury during play, this is not considered aggression and requires different training methods (see [BC SPCA - Preventing or Reducing Excitable Behaviour Fact sheet](#)).

- Stiffening and staring when touched
- Raised hackles, with a stiff tail and a stare
- Chasing a person while barking
- Growling
- Biting
- Staring
- Some types of barking
- Snarling

TRAINING OPTIONS

Aggression motivated by fear or anxiety

Aggression is often motivated by anxiety or fear in certain situations or around a certain type of people (men, tall, people with hats, or in uniform etc). It may be that your dog has never been socialized with that type of person or situation or because of a bad past experience. A dog may get anxious if they associate an event or a person with something bad that might follow.

For example, if your dog has been scolded when called or after you have grabbed his collar, he may then feel anxious when given that command or when you grab his collar. His body language will indicate fear (ears flat, looking away, flattened body, tail tucked in) but he will use threats such as barking, growling, snarling, staring or snapping.

Dogs that have fear aggression can be more aggressive when on leash. This is because the first instinct of a fearful dog is to flee. When on leash, dogs know they cannot flee and opt to fight instead to protect themselves.

Fearful aggressive dogs more so than others may bite if startled. Always approach a dog with caution - anything unexpected such as grabbing his collar suddenly may cause him to nip you.

**Children should never be left unsupervised with dogs, until they are old enough to understand how dogs can react when startled.*

Reducing aggression motivated by fear or anxiety

To reduce the risk of your dog becoming aggressive when scared you must reduce his fear first. Expose your dog slowly to the things or people he fears making sure there is no negative outcome. Instead begin to slowly associate the feared person or situation with a positive outcome. Do not pet your dog or say, "It's OK?" or distract

him with a cookie when he is giving aggressive body language, this will reinforce the behaviour (see [Preventing or Reducing Fear](#)).

"Dominance" Aggression

Dominance is a term that describes how the dog behaves within the context of his relationship with a person. It is not the case that a dog is just 'dominant' but rather some dogs learn that they can manipulate people's behaviour by intimidating with threats or even biting. This is usually a result of a dog that has not received clear rules about what he can and can't do or about who should be in control of resources.

All dogs, but particularly those with aggression problems should first go through 'deference' training. This means training your dog to look to you for cues on how he should behave in various situations. Dogs often become a problem when they stop looking to their people for guidance (see the [Preventing or Reducing Behaviour Problems Fact sheet](#) for more details). Dogs that try to control a person with intimidation and aggressive behaviour must also learn that all resources are in control of that person and must be earned.

This type of aggression usually increases. The dog may start with showing aggression in one situation (i.e. favourite toy removed), but quickly learns that this is an effective way of controlling humans. Many guardians will tolerate or even laugh at the dog's protectiveness over his favourite toy. The dog will then begin to use aggression in other situations to manipulate people. Some dogs may begin to develop 'bizarre' rules about what they will allow their guardians to do or not do.

Reducing dominance aggression

** While undergoing treatment, you need to keep your dog on a nylon leash at all times. This will enable you to remove him from places without the risk of getting bit even if he threatens you .*

Step one. Resources: You must establish control of all resources (toys, food, beds, furniture, display of affection, play, going for walks). Request a 'sit' before feeding, opening a door, putting on a collar, giving a toy, etc. (do not leave food in the bowl for free access). Make sure your dog knows that you make the decisions. Ignore requests for play, snacks, attention and walks, until it is convenient for you.

Step two. The rules: Don't let your dog get away with ignoring your commands. If he understands what you want him to do, get his attention with a rattle can and repeat the command. Don't reward him if he ignores you, but praise him when she obeys. When you give a command such as sit or lay down, give a release command before the dog can go (for example 'free dog?').

If your dog does not wait for the release command before going to his food bowl or through doors, keep him on leash at first. Do not allow your dog to tug on his leash - he should walk to heel or follow you. A head collar will give you more control than a conventional collar. DO NOT use pinch collars, which can cause pain and injury to your dog.

Step three. The lifestyle: Keep a height advantage - don't let your dog onto chairs or beds. Keep him on a long leash so you can remove him from high surfaces without being bitten. Handle your dog - regular grooming will assert your authority. Avoid competition games. Don't allow your dog to stand over you or win tug of war games. Feed your dog after you and the family have eaten. Always go through doorways first. If your dog lies in a doorway or (in your way), ask him to move rather than step over him.

** Caution: Your dog may rebel at first and try to increase aggression instead. This should pass and soon he should accept his new role in the relationship.*

VETERINARY HELP

Aggression can be motivated by pain or various diseases may cause irritability or sudden onset of aggressive behaviour in dogs. A dog that is suffering may react with a bite if you touch him on a sensitive or sore spot. If you suspect your dog is in pain for any reason, be careful how you handle him. Do not let small children play with him and warn adults of the danger. To inspect the problem area, approach your dog with caution and muzzle him. You need to consult your veterinarian.

CAUTIONS/REMEMBER

An important concept about aggression: Dogs like people, learn from experience. If showing aggression is an effective method (which it is most of the time) for keeping people away when scared or to manipulate them, the dog will gain confidence in this strategy and use it in more and more situations. This is why some fearful dogs, (even though their first instinct is to run when frightened) will choose to show aggression first. The longer a dog gets away with using aggression, the harder it is to treat.

Do not wait until your dog bites you or someone else. Begin managing aggression as soon as you see threatening signs or better yet prevent aggression by treating fearfulness or dominant behaviour. Never scream at your dog or hit him. If he is fear aggressive this will make him more fearful. If he is dominant with you, he will feel you are challenging him.

<http://www.spca.bc.ca/AnimalBehaviour/peopleaggression.asp>