

# A Brief Overview of Canine Aggression by Geoff Sharp

## What Is Aggression?

The term aggression refers to a wide variety of behaviours that occur for a multitude of reasons in various circumstances. Virtually all wild animals are aggressive when guarding their territories, defending their offspring and protecting themselves. Species that live in groups, including people and dogs, also use aggression and the threat of aggression to keep the peace and to negotiate social interactions.

To say that a dog is aggressive can mean a whole host of things. Aggression encompasses a range of behaviours that usually begins with warnings and can culminate in an attack. Dogs may abort their efforts at any point during an aggressive encounter. A dog that shows aggression to people usually exhibits some part of the following sequence of increasingly intense behaviours:

- Becoming very still and rigid
- Guttural bark that sounds threatening
- Lunging forward or charging at the person with no contact
- Mouthing, as though to move or control the person, without applying significant pressure
- Muzzle punch (the dog literally punches the person with her nose)
- Growl
- Showing teeth
- Snarl (a combination of growling and showing teeth)
- Snap
- Quick nip that leaves no mark
- Quick bite that tears the skin
- Bite with enough pressure to cause a bruise
- Bite that causes puncture wounds
- Repeated bites in rapid succession
- Bite and shake

Dogs don't always follow this sequence, and they often do several of the behaviours above simultaneously. Many times people do not recognize the warning signs before a bite so they perceive their dogs as suddenly flying off the handle. It can be just milliseconds between a warning and a bite, but dogs rarely bite without giving some type of warning beforehand.

## **Classification of Aggressive Behaviour**

Aggressive behaviour problems in dogs can be classified in different ways. A beneficial scheme for understanding why your dog is aggressive is based on the function or purpose of the aggression.

**Territorial Aggression** - Some dogs will attack and bite an intruder, whether the intruder is friend or foe.

**Protective Aggression** - Dogs may show aggressive behaviour when they think that one of their family members or friends is in peril.

**Possessive Aggression** - Many dogs show the tendency to guard their possessions from others, whether they need to or not.

**Fear Aggression** - A fearful dog may become aggressive if cornered or trapped.

**Defensive Aggression** - Motivated by fear, defensively aggressive dogs decide that the best defence is a good offense.

**Social Aggression** - A dog that perceives itself as high in status may show aggression toward family members.

**Frustration-Elicited Aggression** - A dog who's excited or aroused by something but is held back from approaching it can become aggressive.

**Redirected Aggression** - Redirected aggression occurs when a dog is aroused by or displays aggression toward a person or animal and someone else interferes.

**Pain-Elicited Aggression** - An otherwise gentle, friendly dog can behave aggressively when in pain.

**Sex-Related Aggression** - Intact male dogs will still vie for the attention of females in heat, and females will still compete for access to a male.

**Predatory Aggression** - Some pet dogs show classic canine predatory behaviours, including chasing and grabbing fast-moving things.

## **Family Members, Strangers or Other Animals**

Determining whom the dog is aggressive toward is essential to understanding the behaviour. It's common for dogs to behave aggressively toward unfamiliar people. Some studies report that as many as 60 to 70% of all pet dogs bark threateningly at strangers and act unfriendly when around them. Aggression toward unfamiliar dogs is also widespread. It's less common for dogs to direct aggression toward family members or other pets in the home. Most problematic are dogs who are aggressive toward children, especially children in the family. Not only is aggression toward children exceedingly difficult to treat because of safety concerns, the likelihood that a dog with this problem will ever become trustworthy is slim.

Some dogs are aggressive only to a certain category of people. A dog might be aggressive only with the veterinarian or groomer, or with the postal carrier, or with people in

wheelchairs or individuals using canes and walkers. In some cases, it's easy to limit a dog's access to the people that upset the animal. In other cases, the targeted people are impossible to avoid.

Aggression toward people, aggression toward dogs and aggression toward other animals are relatively independent patterns of behaviour meaning a dog reactive canine will not necessarily be reactive to people.

### **Risk Factors**

When deciding whether to live with and treat an aggressive dog, there are several factors to consider. These factors involve the level of risk in living with the dog and the likelihood of changing the behaviour:

- **Size.** Regardless of other factors, large dogs are more frightening and can inflict more damage than small dogs.
- **Age.** Young dogs with an aggression problem are believed to be more malleable and easier to treat than older dogs.
- **Bite history.** Dogs who have already bitten are a known risk and an insurance liability.
- **Severity.** Dogs who stop their aggression at showing teeth, growling or snapping are significantly safer to live and work with than dogs who bite. Likewise, dogs who have delivered minor bruises, scratches and small punctures are less risky than dogs who have inflicted serious wounds.
- **Predictability.** Dogs at the highest risk of being euthanized for aggression are those who give little or no warning before they bite and who are inconsistently, unpredictably aggressive. Dogs who give warning before they bite allow people and other animals time to retreat and avoid getting hurt. As counterintuitive as it might seem, it's easier to live with a dog that always reacts aggressively in certain situations every time.
- **Targets.** How often your dog is exposed to the targets of her aggression can affect how easy it is to manage and resolve the behaviour. A dog that is aggressive to strangers is relatively easy to control if you live in a rural environment with a securely fenced yard. A dog who's aggressive to children can be managed if her pet parents are childless and have no friends or relatives with children. A dog who is aggressive to unfamiliar dogs poses little difficulty for owners who dislike dog parks and prefer to exercise their dog on isolated hiking trails.
- **Triggers.** Are the circumstances that prompt your dog to behave aggressively easy or impossible to avoid? If your dog only guard's food while eating, the solution is straightforward: If no one can safely enter the kitchen when your dog's there because it guards the empty food bowl in the cupboard, that's another story. If your dog bites any stranger within reach, it is more dangerous than a dog who bites strangers only if they try to touch.
- **Ease of motivating your dog.** The final consideration is how easy it is to motivate your dog during retraining. The safest and most effective way to treat an aggression problem is to implement behaviour modification under the guidance of a qualified professional.

### **Always Work with Your Vet**

Some aggressive dogs behave the way they do because of a medical condition or complication. In addition to acute painful conditions, dogs with orthopaedic problems, thyroid abnormality, adrenal dysfunction, cognitive dysfunction, seizure disorders and sensory deficits can exhibit changes in irritability and aggression. Geriatric dogs can suffer confusion and insecurity, which may prompt aggressive behaviour. Certain medications can alter mood and affect a dog's susceptibility to aggression.

### **Can Aggression Be Cured?**

Owners of aggressive dogs often ask whether they can ever be sure that their dog is cured. Taking into account the behaviour modification techniques that affect aggression, current understanding is that the incidence and frequency of some types of aggression can be reduced and sometimes eliminated. However, there's no guarantee that an aggressive dog can be completely cured. In many cases, the only solution is to manage the problem by limiting a dog's exposure to the situations, people or things that trigger the aggression. Even if a dog has been well behaved for years, it's not possible to predict when all the necessary circumstances might come together to create the perfect storm that triggers the aggression. Dogs that have a history of resorting to aggression as a way of dealing with stressful situations can fall back on that strategy.

### **Are Some Breeds More Aggressive Than Others?**

It's true that some breeds might be more likely to bite if we look at statistics gathered on biting and aggression. One likely reason is that most dog breeds once served specific functions for humans. Some were highly prized for their guarding and protective tendencies, others for their hunting prowess, others for their fighting skills, and others for their tenacity. Even though pet dogs of these breeds rarely fulfil their original purposes these days, individuals still carry their ancestor's DNA in their genes, which means that members of a particular breed might be predisposed to certain types of aggression. Despite this, it's neither accurate nor wise to judge a dog by her breed. Far better predictors of aggressive behaviour problems are a dog's individual temperament and history of interacting with people and other animals.