



Aggression

What is Aggression? Aggression is the intent to intimidate or cause harm, with or without a threat display (meaning the dog may or may not growl, bark or otherwise warn). There are several types of aggression and the majority of aggression is rooted in fear. In fact, aggression and fear are closely related. If you think about it, without fear, there would be no reason for aggression to exist. Though not as common, some dogs do display 'confident' aggression, using aggression to get their way or 'bully' other dogs or people. While each dog is unique in personality, some breeds do seem more predisposed to aggressive tendencies, however any dog can be or become aggressive. Degrees of aggression vary; from occasional growling to outright bites or attacks that come without warning. *Ethology* is the study of animal behavior. *Agonistic* means displaying aggressive or defensive social interaction. In ethology terms, aggression is referred to as agonistic behavior, or an agonistic display.

Dogs can behave aggressively for a number of reasons. Dogs are opportunists, meaning they'll do whatever works to get the result they want. In most cases, dogs turn to aggression to avoid a situation they find frightening or unpleasant. Often, dogs discover that aggression works so well they resort to a good offense as the best defense. Injured or sick dogs may behave aggressively. Genetics and breed contribute to aggressive tendency. We must also look at aggression in context, considering the circumstances under which aggressive behavior occurs. For example, if another dog attacks your dog and your dog bites you as you're trying to break up the fight, I would be hesitant to label your dog aggressive. In another example, let's suppose a dog bites someone who has approached to shake the owner's hand; that behavior is clearly unacceptable. Some examples aren't so clear cut, such as in the case of a young child that is bitten while teasing a dog. While that may be a somewhat expected response, it's not okay.

Statistics

From the CDC (Center for Disease Control): Each year, 800,000 Americans seek medical attention for dog bites; half of these are children. Of those injured, 386,000 require treatment in an emergency department and about a dozen die. The rate of dog bite-related injuries is highest for children ages 5 to 9 years, and the rate decreases as children age. Almost two thirds of injuries among children ages four years and younger are to the head or neck region. Injury rates in children are significantly higher for boys than for girls.

Types of Aggression

Aggression in its various forms is either offensive or defensive. A defensive display occurs when a dog feels fearful or threatened; flight or fight response where the dog feels he has no other options. Defensive aggression can turn into offensive aggression. Offensive aggression occurs in confident dogs that have taken matters into their own paws, dogs using aggression to demand what they want, or in dogs who have resorted to a good offense as the best defense. With some confident offensive aggression, the dog isn't necessarily out of options, rather an aggressive display is his first chosen option. Below we've listed some common forms of aggression. A dog may have multiple types of aggression in any combination. Common types of aggression include:



- 🐾 **Dog Aggressive:** Aggression is directed at other dogs. It could be all other dogs, only some, only one particular dog it just doesn't like, only unfamiliar dogs, only dogs in their territory, etc. Same sex aggression is always worse, meaning males are more likely to fight with other males; females with other females. Of the two, female on female aggression is always much worse. There's a saying in the dog world: Males will fight, Females will fight to the death.
- 🐾 **Human Aggressive:** Aggression is directed towards humans. It has the same traits as dog aggressive and can be directed at strangers, individuals, and even family members. Children followed by adult men are most often the targets of human aggression. Something important to note: Most dog bites to children are inflicted by the family pet.
- 🐾 **Resource Guarding:** This type of aggression occurs when a dog protects or defends a resource. Resources can include anything a dog likes or values; food, toys, locations, people, etc.
- 🐾 **Territorial Aggression:** This is actually a form of Resource Guarding. A dog's territory may include his bed, a room, house, yard, car, or his walking route – any area or space the dog perceives as 'his'.
- 🐾 **Predatory Aggression:** All dogs have a prey drive to some degree, meaning the desire to chase and subdue prey. Prey drive varies from dog to dog and breed to breed, with some dogs or breeds having higher prey drives. Fast lateral movements or 'wounded' sounds can trigger prey drive, which is why you should never run from a dog and why children require close supervision. With some dogs predatory aggression is triggered, in some it becomes habitual. (Interestingly, in dogs bred to herd, we have taken advantage of and 'harnessed' the prey drive.)
- 🐾 **Handling Aggression:** This occurs when a dog does not care for some type of handling, such as being brushed, having his teeth examined, nails trimmed, or being affectionately over handled. Some dogs are also sensitive to having certain areas of their body touched or being touched in a certain way.
- 🐾 **Leash/Barrier Aggression:** This occurs when a dog is restrained by a leash or barrier of some sort. Among other things, the dog feels trapped and cannot flee, then resorts to aggression. Fence fighting is a common form of Barrier Aggression.
- 🐾 **Redirected Aggression:** This occurs when a dog is already in a reactive state, but cannot reach his intended target. For example, the dog is barking at his arch enemy from across the street, but is on leash, so he turns and bites his owner or another dog instead. When a dog bites someone trying to break up a dog fight, we call it a *redirected bite*.
- 🐾 **Displaced Aggression:** This occurs when the dog is in some sort of aroused or agitated state and the emotional state escalates to aggression, with or without an appropriate trigger. For example, sometimes when dogs are playing they become so fired up they experience something called *boil over* or *mobbing*, where two or more dogs all begin fighting.
- 🐾 **Medically-related Aggression:** This is aggression stemming from an underlying medical cause, such as a thyroid condition, brain tumor, disease, injury or illness.



Treating Aggression

Success in treating aggression varies. There are many factors to consider, such as the dog's age, how long the aggressive behavior has been taking place, if there is an underlying medical condition, the dog's individual personality, the level of aggression and the commitment the owner is willing to put forth in correcting the behavior. Early recognition and treatment are the key to success; the sooner aggressive behavior is addressed, the better the chances are to correct it. However, it must be stated that no matter how successful training seems, once a dog has bitten or discovered that aggressive behavior works for him in some way, he may repeat it in the future – we can never say an aggressive dog is cured or will never bite/aggress again.

The best way to treat aggression is to avoid it altogether through prevention. There are many ways to avoid aggression, but first and foremost is proper socialization and basic obedience training at an early age (see *Socializing Your New Dog or Puppy*). The critical socialization period for dogs is between 6 and 14 weeks of age. If socialization didn't occur, or if you've adopted an older dog and/or have discovered an aggression issue or have noticed aggression developing, we'll use operant and classical conditioning techniques to modify your dog's behavior. The goal will be to change the mindset of your dog about the situations that elicit aggressive behavior, so that instead of feeling like he needs to protect himself or aggress, he's comfortable and happy in the situation instead. We'll also give him options and teach alternate behaviors so he won't resort to aggression and other behaviors become automatic, replacing aggressive behavior. In some cases, we may suspect an underlying medical cause or determine veterinary or pharmaceutical intervention is appropriate, either short or long term. Again, results and success can be variable, so we might also include management as part of our approach. Management is controlling the environment and external factors that either affect or are affected by aggression. For example, like people, some dogs simply do not like a certain individual human or other dog. In that case, we may put the dog in a separate area where he cannot have contact with the individual while he/she is present, either while training progresses or for the long term. Using our earlier example of the small child bitten while teasing the dog, we would use both conditioning, to make the dog as comfortable as possible around children, while also using management to make sure the dog is always supervised around children and ensure children are interacting appropriately with the dog. In some cases, management is the simplest and best solution. Let's take a dog that chases and has injured cats. If the owner has no cats, doesn't want cats, and the dog doesn't regularly encounter cats, it may be more effective in the long run to simply be aware and make sure that the dog is properly confined and restrained so he never has access to cats.

Extensive research has proven that operant and classical conditioning methods offer the safest, most effective treatment for aggression (and anything else, for that matter). Aversive, painful or harsh punishment methods may appear to have an effect, but there are always side effects of some sort. At best, the dog will develop problem behaviors in other areas, at worst, the dog will become dangerous. We have seen many dogs that became more aggressive and/or unpredictable with use of harsh aversive or "domination" methods. Forcing a dog to confront his fears or aggressive triggers (known as *flooding*), mistakenly thinking this will desensitize the dog, or using aversive methods for basic obedience training may also have this effect. Never forget – *violence begets violence*.



The Story of “Bodie”

At six months old, Bodie the Border Collie’s chasing habits, natural to his herding breed, had become annoying to his family. To solve the problem, his family put him in a remote control shock collar and issued a ‘correction’ every time Bodie tried to chase or herd. As Bodie aged and the shocks continued, Bodie developed fear and anxiety. When Bodie reached maturity at seventeen months of age, Bodie was shocked for attempting to chase the child’s ball. Bodie turned his frustration on the child in a full blown attack. Bodie continued the attack despite repeated and continuous shocks, and had to be pulled off the child, biting two people who intervened. The child and the rescuers were severely injured and Bodie was euthanized. If proper education and training methods had been used, this tragedy could have been avoided. Proper breed research before choosing a dog would also have been helpful.

Earlier we talked about avoiding aggression. Another way to do this is not to foster or encourage aggressive behaviors. Many owners equate a dog’s inclination to protect them with how much their dog loves them. They like the idea that their dog will protect them, and either deliberately or unknowingly reinforce aggressive behavior in their dog. (Petting, praising or otherwise rewarding the dog for growling/aggressing at someone or thing, or by simply allowing it to continue.) Other owners inadvertently reward a dog’s aggression by trying to soothe the dog, which the dog interprets as reinforcement on several levels. Many, if not most, dogs, despite excellent manners and friendly behavior, will protect their owners in dire situations. Dogs that have been trained for protection work, such as law enforcement dogs, have extensive professional training and their aggressive behavior is highly directed, controllable and under restraint. Dogs that have been encouraged to behave aggressively, but not highly trained in restraint, are like ticking time bombs. No one wants to be responsible for someone being injured or wind up being sued because they created, even unwittingly, an aggressive dog.

The Story of “Mali”

Mali was a Belgian Malinois Shepherd whose owner contacted Canid because Mali was displaying territorial aggression and fear behaviors. At eight months old, Mali was already snapping and lunging at people and was becoming mistrustful of strangers, even outside her territory. Due to her nature as a flock guardian, Mali came into the world with an already high territorial drive.

Mali’s owner was ‘perimeter walking’ her three to five times a day – walking her at the edge of their property – in an attempt to teach Mali the property boundaries so she would stay in the yard, which was reinforcing her territorial drives. Mali’s owner was older, and didn’t appreciate their college age neighbors who sometimes were loud or played loud music that frightened and agitated Mali. In a misguided attempt to ensure Mali understood her owner was not the source of her unhappiness, Mali’s owner took her outside each time to show her it was the neighbors. When she became agitated, her owner stroked, soothed and cooed over her, agreeing with and reinforcing her fearful and aggressive behavior/attitude towards the neighbors/strangers. When they encountered the neighbors during perimeter walks and Mali lunged, barked and snapped at them, her owner petted Mali (claiming to calm her) while both yelling at the neighbors and allowing Mali to continue. Mali’s owner also declined to have her spayed because she was so loving her owner felt she should be bred.

Sadly, Mali’s training failed. In the end, Mali’s owner was too pleased with her behavior and propensity to behave aggressively, which flattered and made the owner feel loved, so they did not follow training recommendations or exercises. Several months later, Mali lunged at and bit a jogger. The jogger was injured (an innocent victim of a feud between neighbors and the owner’s pride); Mali was labeled a vicious dog and quarantined; and her owner had to pay the jogger’s hospital bill, fines, and a substantially higher homeowner’s insurance premium. Though Mali kept her life, it could have been much worse, and she and her owner must live under vicious dog constraints/ requirements which are expensive to maintain and diminish quality of life for both Mali and her owner.



Growling, Puckering and Other Warnings

Dogs have an elaborate body language and vocalizations they use to communicate. When a dog pulls its lips back and bares its teeth to express displeasure or warn, we call that an *agonistic pucker*. Agonistic puckers appear in several forms and degrees. Dogs use growling, puckering and other body language to say “I’m not happy about this situation; if it doesn’t stop, I may have to bite.” Individual dogs have different *thresholds*, or tolerance levels, before they use these methods to warn, as well as different degrees as to how fast their aggressive behavior escalates.

The Story of “Cockie”

Cockie was a seventeen pound cockapoo acquired from a pet store as a puppy. Cockie’s owner called for help when Cockie reached the point that he was viciously attacking all humans and dogs suddenly and without warning. Cockie was nearly three years old and had a number of bites and injuries to his credit by the time the consult occurred. He was so violent, he had also injured himself.

As a result of no socialization and constant isolation, Cockie had begun displaying aggressive behavior when he was about seven months old. (Poor care and genetics were probably also contributing factors.) When Cockie growled or curled his lip, he was severely reprimanded to include harsh physical punishment, escalating to the point of being “spanked” with a leather leash. Because of this, Cockie not only learned to despise humans, but stopped warning and resorted to a sudden, violent attack pattern. Cockie lived in an empty garage, crazed and alone, and human contact was avoided altogether – his food was thrown to him through a window. The owners had called because they wanted the use of their garage again.

Despite the nature of his breed as companion dog with a friendly disposition and his small size, Cockie was one of the most dangerous dogs I have ever encountered.

Sadly, the situation had become so extreme that all efforts to help Cockie failed. In the end, Cockie was humanely euthanized because he posed such a danger to himself as well as others. Even though we suspected underlying genetics as a significant factor, it’s probable that if Cockie’s warnings had been heeded, rather than punished, and proper training employed early on, Cockie could have had a good life as a valued member of the family.

It’s important to understand that some of these warning behaviors are normal and even appropriate, especially growling, especially when dogs growl at one another. For example, an adult dog that sometimes growls at a boisterous, coming of age juvenile to stop jumping all over her while she’s trying to nap is not necessarily a cause for concern; that’s how they communicate. The adult dog is simply saying what we as humans often say ... “Okay, that’s enough, knock it off.” Your trainer will help you determine what’s normal and acceptable as opposed to behaviors that exceed normal communication or thresholds, as well as how to interpret dog body language and warnings.

While it may sound counterintuitive, it’s very important not to punish a dog for displaying growling, puckering or other body language warnings, especially growling. Those behaviors are our early warning system – punishing them may cause the dog to stop giving warning and move straight to action. This is when we wind up with dogs that “just suddenly bite or attack out of the blue”. In some cases, a dog may have been satisfied with just warning and if we take that option away, he has no choice left but action. Also, by punishing warnings and aggression, we send the message that it’s okay to meet anger/violence with same, therefore creating a violent, aggressive cultural norm for the dog.

Warning behaviors are also important to trainers in diagnosing and treating aggression. These behaviors can occur in varying degrees,

combinations and context, and contain subtle nuances that speak volumes to an experienced trainer that will help develop a successful rehabilitation plan. While Canid will never use harsh corrections or punishments, at some point we may use humane consequence techniques (such as time out) as part of



the treatment plan, as appropriate for the individual dog and situation. It's important to understand that consequence techniques used are part of an overall plan that will stop or reduce aggressive behaviors by redirecting thinking and changing the mindset of the dog, but will not 'take out' our early warning systems that are a necessary part of every dog's psychology.

Tools

Sometimes we will use tools while managing and treating aggression. The trainer may use tools such as an "Assess-A-Hand" and the treatment plan may employ items such as no pull harnesses, Gentle Leaders, crates, baby gates, collars, humane basket muzzles or homeopathic aids such as DAP, music or melatonin. Canid uses only humane treatment tools that will not create pain or fear (for example, prong/pinch or choke collars will not be used). Different tools are appropriate for different circumstances and require an acclimation process/method. Please do not introduce methods or use tools without guidance from Canid, as improper application or acclimation could reduce effectiveness or eliminate our ability to use methods or tools that would have otherwise been helpful. As mentioned before, veterinary, medication or pharmaceutical intervention is also sometimes appropriate. Medication may be required for long or short term use depending on your individual dog.

Role of the Trainer

Notice that this overview does not include specific, detailed instructions or rehab plans used in treating aggression. It also does not contain detailed descriptions or pictures of body language and warnings. While there are many books and videos on the subject that can help you understand and learn about these topics, they are static in nature and cannot provide the dynamic interaction and experience that your trainer brings to the picture. Books and videos are informative, but each situation is different and applying the information is not so cut and dried and can prove difficult. As we've discussed, there are many types and degrees of aggression, as well as many approaches and tools to treat aggression. The role of your trainer is to diagnose the type of aggression, identify the cause and the best methods and tools to treat it, point out body language as it happens, and act as your coach to educate you for success in executing the treatment plan and training methods. Your trainer will also know when it's necessary to consult your vet and act as your interface and liaison.

The Story of The Screamin' Red Tomato

The Screamin' Red Tomato is the name of my sensible, four cylinder, bright red Honda CRV. One day the battery died, activating the anti-theft feature on the radio. I needed a code to reactivate the radio, and the only place I could get it was from the back of the actual radio, meaning I'd have to remove it. Armed with instructions from the internet, I set to work – a few screws and some plastic, how hard could it be?

Many hours of mass destruction later, I took the Tomato to a car audio installation specialist. Including labor and replacement parts, the Tomato was resuscitated for \$189. Had I gone there in the first place, it would have cost \$25 to retrieve the code. Sometimes there's just no substitute for experience and expertise...

When treating problem behaviors, especially aggression, the trainer sometimes has a difficult role. We must often tell clients things that are disturbing to them or that they might not want to hear about their dog. We may suggest the dog see the vet or take medication. In rare cases, we may have to recommend that a dog be removed from the home due to safety considerations, especially where small children or infants are involved and at risk. Please remember - At Canid, dogs are our passion. We want them to enjoy happy, fulfilled lives with the families who love them. We understand that you love your dog and he is an important member of your family, and that living with and treating an aggressive dog can be emotionally difficult. Thank you for entrusting the care and treatment of your dog to Canid. Canid will make every effort to quickly diagnose and treat your dog for the best possible result in the shortest amount of time, while ensuring you and your dog are treated with respect, dignity and compassion.



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