

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

Aggression

Aggression in dogs is one of the most common problems that owners experience. This is ironic, because dogs are not naturally aggressive animals. In canine society, individuals do everything they can to avoid aggression and conflict. They use subtle signs of body language and facial expression to warn others of impending conflict. Dogs may comprehend all of these nuances, but many people don't. Aggression is complex, and a dog should not simply be labelled as 'bad' for displaying aggression. Understanding the motivations behind aggressive behaviour is the first step in avoiding or eliminating this problem.

Dogs are not democratic animals, and function in a hierarchical manner. Contrary to popular belief, dogs generally do not fight for their position in a pack: personality and strength of will are often more important factors than physical strength. However, dogs will resort to aggression to maintain or elevate their social status if they have to. People often exacerbate this by interfering in the hierarchy by protecting a lower dog or submitting to their dogs. It is important that people have the highest status in their pack to prevent challenges from their dogs.

There are many other reasons for aggression: protection of territory (including objects and people); protection of puppies by a mother dog; hunting instinct; fear or anxiety that leads to defensive aggression; pain and illness; competition for resources (eg, attention, food, space); over-excited play that gets out of control; aggression used to discipline other members of the pack (including people); gender (male dogs are usually more aggressive); lack of socialisation; learned aggression (common in stray dogs); selection by breeders for aggressive tendencies; training (eg, security dogs); age (senior dogs); metabolic disturbances (hunger or hormonal imbalances); seasonal changes (increase in activity in warmer months); and aggression that is displaced or redirected due to frustration.

Rarely, dogs will show aggression for seemingly no reason. They attack another dog or person, unexpectedly and with no warning. The attack is quick, soon over, and the dog recovers soon afterwards and seems to forget the incident. This is known as idiopathic aggression. There appears to be a genetic basis for this problem, because some breeds are

more prone to it than others, usually large breeds, and poor breeding practices may be to blame. A similar condition known as rage syndrome is found in small and medium dogs.

Aggression in dogs is a problem that should be taken seriously, regardless of the size of the dog. Not only because these dogs can cause physical harm to people and other animals, but also because an aggressive dog is a stressed and unhappy dog. Aggression is rarely a reason to euthanize a dog because dogs are not naturally aggressive animals. Aggression is usually the result of misunderstanding by humans.

If you have an aggressive dog, contact a professional who can guide you through the process of rehabilitation.

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