

Training and Behavior Modification Techniques for Territorial Aggression in Dogs

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Aggression directed toward unfamiliar people entering the home is a common behavior complaint of dog owners. Many pet owners are skeptical they will be able to make training progress, because they do not (or are unable to) have many visitors. Great! Training needs to start without unfamiliar people in the home. This session will explore behavior modification strategies for safely, humanely, and effectively addressing aggression towards unfamiliar people in the home as part of a complete veterinary behavioral treatment plan.

Once a dog has been diagnosed with territorial aggression, part of a complete treatment plan will include techniques and tactics for safely introducing the dog to people without inducing fear and/or anxiety in the dog. We will explore three behavior modification and training approaches to assist the dog and pet owner with calmer introductions.

Introductions Exercise

The initial training exercises avoids introductions with the person coming into the residence. Place the dog away out of sight prior to guests arriving to the home. A safe, secure location out of sight of the entrance to the home is ideal. This prevents a negative experience at the door. The dog should separately be conditioned to enjoy their confinement area, so it does not result in stress or anxiety.

Guests should ignore and avoid threatening body language (approaching, staring, leaning over, or reaching for the dog). Guests should not pet the dog. Once the guests are seated in the home, expose the dog on leash and at a distance from guests such that it is not reactive. The majority of treats should come from residents of the home and not guests. Use treats for classical counter conditioning (changing of a negative emotion to a positive emotion). Keep the dog busy with various cues. Capture the dog looking at the guests and reinforce. Capture and reinforce offered (unprompted) attention to the handler. Use the distance away from guests and visual barriers to lessen reactivity (fear, anxiety, or aggression). Gradually reduce the distance from guests without reactivity over several training sessions. The dog should get more and more comfortable visualizing people from a distance while on leash. End the session on a good note and after a short positive exposure session, place the dog away to prevent a negative experience. Gradually, the duration out in the environment (under control of a leash) may be increased without reactivity. The dog should wear a basket muzzle prior to close contact with unfamiliar people in the home. Gradually, the duration out in the environment may be increased with specific visitors to the home. Do these exercises with the dog on leash and collar for safety. Use a basket muzzle to minimize the risk of injury prior to close contact with unfamiliar people.

For the dog to be able to successfully navigate this exercise with unfamiliar people in the home, it is imperative to practice this set up routinely without anyone coming to the residence and then practice the exercise with familiar and accepted people. This makes the exercise and process mundane and not anticipatory of unfamiliar people being present.

Door Exercise

Generally, you should have made progress with introductions to people on the property prior to doing the door exercise. The following exercise should be controlled with the dog on leash and collar for safety. A basket muzzle can minimize the risk of injury prior to close contact with unfamiliar people.

- 1) Teach the dog to sit at the door for a food treat without any visitors at the door.
- 2) Several times during the day, go to the door, ask the dog to sit, and offer a food reward for sitting.
- 3) Next, with the dog sitting at the door, jiggle the door knob or crack the door, and reward the dog for remaining seated. The dogs should be held on leash prior to opening the door or a barrier should be in place for safety and to avoid accidental escapes from the property.
- 4) Eventually, you should be able to open and close the door without visitors there and reward the dog for sitting.
- 5) Repeat the above, but add a light knock before you open and close the door.
- 6) Gradually, you can increase the intensity of the knock with the dog remaining seated.
- 7) Eventually you should be able to ring the doorbell while the dog sits.
- 8) Next, start with someone familiar to the dog at a distance (20 feet) from the door. Repeat steps 1-7, but acknowledge the persons presence. Say 'Hello', the visitor should respond accordingly.
- 9) Gradually the persons distance to the door may be reduced while the dog sits. Start with the person about 20 feet away, and gradually reduce the distance to 19 feet, 18 feet, etc. while repeating the above exercise.
- 10) Eventually, the person should be able to stop 6 feet away from the door. The handler should reward the dog for sitting.
- 11) Repeat the above exercise with more and more unfamiliar people.

Transferring Arrival Signal to an Alternate Behavior

Doorbells, phone dings, and knocking can all be indicators of the arrival of a person at the residence. Conditioning the dog to do an alternate behavior in response to the signal, can make every day management easier for the pet owner and dog. The first step is to determine the alternate behavior for the dog to perform. Traditionally, teaching the dog to go to a place has been used as an alternate behavior. This can be the most challenging and should only be used once success with earlier phases of training have been accomplished. Other options can be to grab a toy and run to the owner or go to a room or a backdoor to be released into a secured backyard.

Teach the alternate behavior and put it on cue. Then transfer the cue to the arrival signal by recording the arrival signal and introducing it in a novel location (ie not in the house). Play the new cue/arrival signal. Follow it immediately with the known cue for the alternate behavior. Reinforce the dog for performing the behavior. Repeat 10 times. Start to pause for 1 or 2 seconds after giving the arrival signal and see if the dog starts to perform the behavior. If not, give the known cue. Continue working on transferring the cue over several sessions until the dog is able to respond to the arrival signal with starting to perform the behavior.

Other Tips

What if the dog shows aggression?

The dog's behavior is just information about how he is feeling. It is not right or wrong, just information. The immediate response is to increase the dog's distance from the situation by cuing an alternate behavior, such as "Let's go," in an upbeat tone. Get to a distance away, maybe even out of sight, and cue another behavior such as sit, reward the dog when he responds. If he is unable to respond, move further away. Remain calm. Although it can be frustrating to have a setback, the more upset we act the more upset the dog will be.

How to handle unplanned visitors

Although management and planning are important for planned visitors, having a plan for unplanned visitors is also important. Practice spontaneous arrivals and having the dog go to a safe confinement area, such as a room, kennel, or secure outdoor location. If safe to do so, provide a long-lasting food dispensing toy to occupy the dog. Have these toys prepared and ready to go.

Alternative to meeting in the house

Some dogs that display territorial aggression toward unfamiliar people only show it in a specific context such as the home. Some dogs will be overly stressed with the presence of people in the house. This can mean that re-evaluation of the treatment plan and further medical intervention with behavioral pharmacology might be warranted. When a dog is more relaxed with people off the property or when a non-stressful starting point cannot be accomplished in the house, incorporating desensitization to the person on a walk might allow for acclimation to the new person.

Conclusion

The goal of these exercises is to provide a controlled and safe way to introduce the dog to specific people. It is a process that will need to be utilized with each individual person. There likely will be some people the dog will not be comfortable with. Some situations are best managed with avoidance. Safety and management should always be the cornerstone to treatment.