

Aggression is the most common and most serious behavior problem in dogs. It's also the number-one reason why pet parents seek professional help from behaviorists, trainers and veterinarians. Virtually all wild animals are aggressive when guarding their territories, defending their offspring and protecting themselves.

A dog that shows aggression to people usually exhibits some part of the following sequence of intense behaviors:

- 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
- 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
- Bite and shake

Dogs don't always follow this sequence, and they often do several of the behaviors above simultaneously. It can be just milliseconds between a warning and a bite. If your dog has been aggressive in the past or you suspect they could become aggressive, take time to evaluate the situations that have upset her. Ask yourself the following:

- *Who bore the brunt of her aggression?*
- *When and where did it happen?*
- *What else was going on at the time?*
- *What had just happened or was about to happen to your dog?*
- *What seemed to stop her aggression?*

Learning the answers to these questions can provide insight into the reasons for her behavior.

Types of Aggression

Aggressive behavior problems in dogs can be classified in different ways.

Fear Aggression

Fear aggression is the most common type of aggression that an animal will display. When animals and people are afraid of something, they prefer to get away from that thing. But if escaping isn't an option, most animals will switch to a fight response. Fear aggression is characterized by rapid nips or bites and the threats may not be clear all the time. A fearful dog might not show her teeth or growl to warn the victim off. In this kind of situation, the only warning is the dog's fearful posture and her attempts to retreat. Male and female dogs are equally prone to fear aggression, and this type of aggression is common in both puppies and adults.

Defensive Aggression

Closely related to fear aggression is defensive aggression. The primary difference is the strategy adopted by the dog. Defensively aggressive dogs are still motivated by fear, but instead of trying to retreat, they decide that the best defense is a good offense. They may initially charge at a person or another dog who frightens them, barking and growling. Regardless of whether the victim freezes or advances, the defensively aggressive dog often delivers the first strike.

Possessive Aggression

Dogs evolved from wild ancestors who had to compete for food, nesting sites and mates to survive. Even though our pet dogs no longer face such harsh realities, many still show the tendency to guard their possessions from others. These dogs might react aggressively when a person or another animal comes near their possessions. But some dogs will hide their cherished things around the house and guard them from unsuspecting people or animals that have no idea that they're anywhere near a valued object.

Protective Aggression

Dogs will always defend their family. If one member of the "Pack" is in danger, dogs will defend them. This is classified as protective. Sometimes dogs reserve protective aggression for

individuals they consider particularly vulnerable. A dog that has never shown aggression to strangers in the past might start behaving aggressively when she has a litter of puppies. Both male and female dogs are equally prone to protective aggression.

Territorial Aggression

Dogs' wild relatives are territorial. They live in a certain area, and they defend this area from intruders. Some dogs display the same tendencies. Dogs will attack and bite an intruder, whether the intruder is friend or foe. Territorial aggression can occur along the boundary regularly patrolled by a dog or at the boundaries of their pet parents' property. Other dogs show territorial aggression only toward people or other animals coming into the home.

Social Aggression

Animals who live in social groups, adopt a type of hierarchical order that influences which group members get first crack at food. So rather than having to fight, those lower down on the totem pole know to wait until the higher-ups have had their share before taking their turn. Individuals of high status use aggressive threats to remind the others of their place in the pack. The relationships between people and dogs that live together are certainly more complex than this, but it's still important to know that a dog who perceives them self as high in status may show aggression toward family members. This is why a dog might be perfectly trustworthy with one pet parent but react aggressively toward the other or toward young children in the family.

The Risks

Keep in consideration as well that if you are deciding to live and treat your dog of aggression that there are several factors to be mindful of as the pet parent. These factors involve the level of risk in living with your dog and the likelihood of changing their behavior:

Size

Large dogs inflict more damage than smaller dogs

Age

Younger dogs are easier to treat than older

Bite history

Dogs who have already bitten are a known risk

Severity of Aggression

Dogs who have delivered minor bruises, scratches and small punctures pose a lower risk 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.

Targets

How often your dog is exposed to the targets of her aggression can affect how easy it is to manage and resolve her behaviour. A dog that's 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.

Triggers

Are the circumstances that prompt your dog to behave aggressively easy or impossible to avoid? If your dog only guards her food while she's eating, the solution is straightforward: Keep away from her while she's eating. If no one can safely enter the kitchen when your dog's there because she guards her empty food bowl in the cupboard, that's another story.

To help out with your dog's aggressive behaviour, always work with your Veterinarian, as some aggressive dogs behave the way they do because of a medical condition. Dogs with orthopaedic problems, thyroid abnormality, adrenal dysfunction, cognitive dysfunction, seizure disorders and sensory deficits can exhibit changes in irritability and aggression.

Taking into account the behaviour modification techniques that affect aggression, our 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 her aggression.