



A non-profit that educates
and supports dog owners

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Threats are signals
that aggression—a
bite—may follow.
All threats should
be taken seriously.

THE AGGRESSIVE DOG

What is aggressive behavior?

Not only does the word “aggression” evoke different images for different people, its definition also varies in the scientific literature. Because of this confusion, behaviorists instead speak of agonistic behavior which includes a variety of behaviors dogs can show during social conflicts.

When your dog feels threatened by something, he can choose how to respond to that threat. We’ll discuss four different choices, all of which are examples of agonistic behavior.

Avoid or Escape. If your dog feels threatened by say, a child reaching out to pet him, a good choice he can make is to leave, or get away from the child’s reach. Choosing to avoid conflict is generally a great choice for a dog. When a dog can’t escape—if, for example, you force your dog to sit and allow the child to pet him—your dog has to make another choice about how to respond. Sometimes dogs don’t realize they can escape—perhaps they are too afraid to run past you, so the end result of having to choose another response is the same.

Be Submissive, “give in.” When your dog allows you to take a bone away from him, he is acquiescing or “giving in” to your wishes, and his body postures will reflect that. Submissive postures overlap some with fearful postures. Dogs flatten their ears, tuck or lower their tails, crouch low and avoid eye contact.

When dogs can’t escape a threat, some will choose to be submissive in order to stop the threat. Submissive behaviors are sometimes referred to as “cut off” signals because they serve to “cut off” the threat or aggressive behavior from the opponent. You might see these submissive behaviors when your dog is challenged by another dog, or when you yell at him. Submissive behaviors are often misinterpreted as “guilty looks,” something we discussed in another article.

Rather than choosing to submit, some dogs, because of their personalities, past experiences, or both, choose to threaten back. Threats are another type of agonistic behavior.

Threaten. Threats are signals that aggression - a bite - may follow. To be safe, you should always assume that a threatening dog will attack if the situation doesn’t change. Threats include barking, lunging, showing teeth, growling, and even snapping without contact, or inhibited biting that leaves no mark or injury.

Animal behaviorists generally discriminate two kinds of threats and aggressive behaviors, offensive and defensive. Offensive animals use body postures that make them appear large and intimidating by carrying their tails high, standing up tall with a stiff body, orienting towards the opponent and keeping the ears erect.

Defensive dogs are both threatening and fearful. Defensive body postures are just the opposite of offensive ones, with the tail tucked or lowered, ears back or flat, and a crouched body carriage. While these are also fearful postures, the defensive dog is also growling, barking, baring his teeth, and/or the hair on his back may be raised.

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Your first
responsibility is to
protect people and
other animals from
your dog.

Show Ambivalence. It's not uncommon for dogs to appear partly offensive and partly defensive. These dogs are ambivalent—meaning they are unsure how to respond. Ambivalent dogs may also show displacement behaviors. They are labeled such because they are “displaced” out of their normal context, and include licking, yawning, scratching, and/or sneezing. They have been mis-labeled in the popular literature as “calming signals.”

Be Aggressive. In the narrow sense of the word, aggression is behavior that causes physical harm, meaning a bite or scratch. Aggression can also be offensive or defensive. When viewed from the framework of agonistic behavior, you can see that many dogs that are labeled “aggressive” are actually threatening. Here we use aggression to mean both threats and behavior that causes harm.

Why Do Some Dogs Become Aggressive?

Aggressive behavior is the result of interactions between many complex factors. Genetic predispositions, hormones, age, sex, reproductive status (intact vs. spayed/neutered), early experiences, later learning, and overall health affect aggressive behavior. Genetic predispositions may lead some dogs to bite with less provocation in certain situations than other dogs. Because threats and aggression so often “work” for dogs to make things they don't like stop or go away, it can quickly escalate.

What Are The Different Types Of Aggressive Behavior?

Categorizing aggression is somewhat arbitrary and requires detailed knowledge of dog behavior. Animal behaviorists generally categorize aggression into different types depending on the dog's body postures, the situation in which the behavior occurs, and who, or what, the dog is reacting to.

Popular literature and media about dogs tends to label most aggression as due to “dominance”, or because the owner is not the “pack leader”. This is simply not true and reflects a lack of understanding of dog behavior.

In fact, most aggression problems are due to defensive behavior. Contrary to popular literature, dogs are most likely to be defensively motivated. Defensive dogs are both fearful and threatening or aggressive. You can see drawings and descriptions of the behavior below.

Offensive aggression can be thought of as the opposite of defensive aggression. Offensive dogs could be labeled angry rather than fearful and will initiate an attack, while defensive dogs react to protect themselves. You can see drawings and descriptions of the behavior below. You will need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or perhaps another behavior consultant to help you sort out what is motivating your dog's behavior. Brief descriptions of the most common categories of dog aggression follow.

Dominance aggression is motivated by a challenge to the dog's social status or to his control of a social interaction such as when you try to punish him.

Possessive aggression occurs when the dog is defending a valuable object such as a bone, a toy, or a favored sleeping place such as a couch.

Territorial aggression occurs when the dog is attempting to defend his perceived property, the house, the yard or even a regularly walked path.

Protective aggression occurs when the dog is attempting to protect himself,

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Basic obedience training will not resolve aggression problems.

or a member of his social group from a real or a perceived threat such as a stranger or another dog.

Fear-motivated aggression occurs when the dog is afraid and is defending himself.

What Should You Do if Your Dog has Threatened or Bit?

Your first responsibility is to protect people and other animals from your dog. Manage the aggressive behavior by keeping your aggressive dog separated from others or muzzle him when he must be in situations where he may bite. For example, if your dog is aggressive around his food, feed him away from others. Clearly understand however, that managing the problem doesn't change your dog's behavior.

Next, have your dog thoroughly examined by your veterinarian. Aggressive behavior can be a symptom of some diseases. Plus, any condition, such as sore joints, an ear infection, or an abscessed tooth, that causes your dog to be painful and irritable, can motivate aggressive behavior.

Because aggression is such a serious issue, you should work with a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist, or other behavior consultant to help you decide whether it is safe to keep your dog and work with his aggressive behavior. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

When behaviorists work with aggression problems, techniques are used to help your dog learn to be friendly and non-aggressive. Desensitization and counter conditioning have been successful in treating dog aggression. These techniques are explained in another Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

There are no medications that by themselves, have been scientifically proven to effectively modify aggressive behavior. Your veterinarian will decide whether medication could be beneficial.

What Not To Do

It is much easier to do the wrong thing and worsen aggression problems than it is to choose the right techniques that have the best chance to improve your dog's behavior.

Punishing aggressive behavior with physical force or painful procedures is not only dangerous but will make the behavior worse. Do not "scruff shake" or "alpha roll" your dog. Avoid harsh "corrections" with choke or pinch collars. Do not use remote controlled electronic collars.

Training classes are designed to teach your dog basic "commands" such as sit, down, come and stay. While it is always beneficial for your dog to respond to you, basic training will not resolve aggression problems. Enrolling a dog with an aggression problem in a regular obedience class is dangerous.

Some behavior consultants or trainers offer classes specifically designed for aggressive dogs, but you must be extremely careful to choose one that is well managed. Dogs should never be allowed to "fight it out" in these classes. Ask your pet professional or a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you evaluate any class you might be interested in.

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Recognizing offensively and defensively aggressive dogs

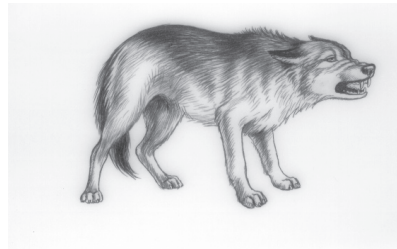
The drawings below show many elements of the body postures of aggressive dogs. You can learn more about reading dog body postures from the DVD “*Canine Body Postures*” available from us or from www.HelpingFido.com.



Drawing courtesy of the ASPCA. Used with permission.

The first drawing shows an offensively threatening dog. Notice that these dogs show one or more of the following:

1. Standing up tall with a stiff body posture
2. Hair on the back standing up
3. Tail straight up, it may be wagging
4. Ears rotated forward
5. Direct eye contact or staring
6. Lips puckered, teeth bared from the front of the mouth
7. Barking and/or growling
8. May lunge, snap at or chase others
9. Body pointed directly toward victim



The second drawing shows a defensively threatening dog. Notice that these dogs show one or more of the following:

1. Crouched or lowered body posture
2. Hair on the back or on rear standing up
2. Ears back or down
3. Teeth bared from the back of the mouth
4. Barking or growling
5. Tail straight out, down, or tucked

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