

# The Truth about Aggression and Dominance in Dogs

## Introduction

Aggression is a common problem faced by many dog owners. It is commonly misunderstood to be based in dominance. In actuality, there are various reasons that dogs can react aggressively. Most commonly these acts are based in fear or anxiety. This handout, will attempt to help you differentiate whether your dog's aggression is based in dominance or another stimulus, like fear or possession. However it is not meant to replace visits and discussions with your veterinarian.

## Common types of aggression

- **Fear aggression:**

Many commonplace human behaviors are threatening gestures to dogs, but their reactions are often times very subtle and easily missed by most people. Anything that can cause your dog to feel distressed or uneasy can illicit an aggressive reaction. Such things include: sustained eye contact, pressure over the top of the head, lifting the dog, bending over the top of a dog, certain force-based training techniques, or trying to take something of high value away from the dog.

- **Territorial aggression:**

Dogs can react aggressively when a person comes into an area that it regards as its home. There is often a basis of anxiety in dogs that have territorial aggression.

- **Possessive aggression:**

When aggression is directed toward a person that the dog views approaching something of high value (food, toys, family members).

- **Redirected aggression:**

When the dog is frustrated by the inability to reach an object or person that elicits its aggression and instead acts aggressively toward a person that is within reach.

- **Dominance aggression:**

True dominance aggression is *very* rare. Most often aggressive acts are based out of another type of motivation. Usually what is assumed to be dominance aggression is actually based out of fear or anxiety.

## What is your dog's motivation for its aggression?

It is important to watch the body posture of your dog during a time of aggression to determine the underlying emotional state of the dog causing the aggression. Here are some examples of what to look for:

| Fearful or submissive postures   | Confident postures  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoiding eye contact</li><li>• Lowered head and tail</li><li>• Tense body posture</li><li>• Ears to the side, back or down</li><li>• Horizontal lip retraction</li><li>• Licking lips</li><li>• Yawning</li><li>• Crouched body posture</li><li>• Moving slowly or freezing</li><li>• Submissive urination</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sustained eye contact</li><li>• Ears erect and forward</li><li>• Vertical lip retraction</li><li>• Forward-leaning body posture</li></ul> |

## **What do I do with my aggressive dog?**

*Seek help for your dog. Do not rely on this handout alone!*

### **Determine what triggers the aggression**

What is your dog's motivation and triggers? Being aware of your dog's body posture and language will help you identify triggers so that you can accurately determine the basis of the aggression and help your dog overcome its aggressive behavior.

### **Be safe and avoid harmful situations**

Once you identify the triggers, try to avoid them as much as possible. If they are unavoidable, consider the use of safety tools such as basket muzzles or head collars to get better control of your dog. You will need to contact your veterinarian for help.

### **Reestablish leadership with your dog**

Many people have misconceptions about truly dominant actions from dogs. A dog that walks ahead of its owner or disobeys commands is not expressing dominance but is showing effects of improper training. We are not part of the dog's pack as many people believe and thus we should not look for a role as the "dominant" dog. Rather you should try to attain leadership by having the dog look to you for guidance in any situation, instead of being submissive or fearful of your commands. Reestablishing leadership can be done by using non-confrontational positive reinforcement techniques. Tools such as head collars can be used to help re-direct your dog's behavior.

### **Avoid punishing unwanted behaviors**

Punishment-based techniques, such as leash corrections, alpha-rolling, shoulder jabs, verbal disrupters (such as 'baaaaa' and 'tssssh'), and training discs/chains tossed at dogs, do not address the underlying motivation, require constant direction and force, and typically do not result in positive long term benefits. These types of punishments have been shown to actually *increase* aggressive behavior. Positive reinforcement training and behavior modification methods focus on changing the underlying emotion of the dog's aggression, while promoting and rewarding desired behaviors.

Aggressive behavior is a common problem faced by dog owners. Proper interpretation and understanding your dog's body posture and triggers is important to determine the cause of the aggression, and subsequently, the proper treatment plan. The above are some general guidelines for working with an aggressive dog, but don't forget to talk to your veterinarian or ask about referral to a veterinary behaviorist for more specific information for your own dog.

*Handout created as part of a class exercise by veterinary students:*

Mandy Predmore, Holland Quick, and Jennifer Ree

Written under the direction of Dr. Melissa Bain



***Clinical Animal Behavior Service***

<http://behavior.vetmed.ucdavis.edu>