



MANAGEMENT OF FEAR AGGRESSIVE DOGS

(Dog on dog aggression)

When your dog meets an unfamiliar dog, the two begin a greeting process that quickly establishes position (dominance and submission). The dominant dog will stand erect, tail and ears up, making himself appear as large as possible. The less dominant dog may avoid eye contact, put his tail between his legs or, if quite submissive, roll over onto his back. This establishment of position is normally a smooth process that takes only seconds.

When meeting unfamiliar dogs, the fear aggressive dog quickly sends signals intending to keep the other dog away. This posturing may include staring, raising hackles or standing very erect to appear larger. Quickly following these signals, the fear aggressive dog may bare teeth, growl or even lunge toward the oncoming dog. The approaching dog will usually counter with aggressive signals of his own as a protective measure. This is a normal reaction in even the most mild-mannered dog. Many fear aggressive dogs are also quite over-reactive to dominant gestures given by other dogs (no matter how minute) and are prone to the physical aggression that most dogs find unnecessary.

It is not unusual for fearfulness to be genetic. In addition to a genetic predisposition, fearfulness is also often the product of a lack of full socialization. If a young puppy is not exposed to a wide variety of people, dogs and situations in a safe environment, he will be unlikely to feel safe and stress free in those situations as an adult. While a puppy can quickly learn to feel confident in most any situation with a relative minimum number of safe exposures, an older dog may take months to accept a situation that has caused fear and stress in the past.

Aggression in fearful dogs is an adaptation to a stressful situation. The dog usually learns quite by chance that a growl will tend to send away another dog that was intending to interact. Because the aggression produced the desired effect, it quickly becomes a favored stress-reducing tool. However, this low level of aggression can easily escalate when the simple growl fails to work upon occasion. Soon growling is replaced by lunging and/or biting because this tool is even more effective in avoiding meetings.

Aggression falls into three groups: dominant aggressive dogs, fearful dogs that have learned that being aggressive is a good tool to keep other dogs away and dogs that respond with aggression because of a history of violence or mistreatment in the past. In short, they are either fear aggressive or dominant aggressive. While there is a world of difference between these two motivating factors, the resultant behavior looks pretty much the same. This handout addresses fear aggression only. Dominance aggression is handled in a distinctly different manner.

The process of behavior modification can be a lengthy one. In the interim, you must have a plan to manage (versus modify) your dog's aggressive tendencies.

- First and most importantly, you must ensure that your dog cannot engage in aggression against other dogs in your absence. Be certain that your dog is safely indoors or allowed outdoors only if he cannot gain access to other dogs. Equally important is to ensure that your dog does not become highly aroused by having visual access to nearby dogs. If your dog charges the fence growling and bristling every time another dog walks by, find a way to visually block the open areas that are a problem. By aggressing multiple times a day in your absence, he is getting to "practice" being aggressive over and over again. This maintains the well-worn neural pathways to aggression.
- On walks you must be able to have physical control of your dog by keeping him on a leash with a Halti on anytime he may have the opportunity to run into unfamiliar dogs. It is also advisable to carry Direct Stop (a citronella spray) with you on every walk. This gives you a quick and easy way to ward off loose dogs approaching your fear aggressive dog and also gives you a way to stop overt aggression from your own dog should you find yourself in an unexpected situation.
- Maintain a loose leash while walking your dog. If you tighten the lead and hold your breath as many people do when another dog approaches, you signal him to become fearful and to initiate aggression. Walks have no doubt become highly stressful for both you and your dog. As a parallel, imagine walking through a bad neighborhood (one that causes you to feel stressed) with a friend. Suddenly he gasps and grabs your arm. Your stress level would likely "send you through the roof." This is just what happens with your dog when you tighten the lead when approaching another dog.
- As a diversionary tactic, pull your dog away (10-20 feet) from the unfamiliar dog and immediately begin obedience training. Your attitude should be calm and commanding. Reward heavily for obedience, thereby avoiding a stress trigger.
- If a meeting of dogs is unavoidable, maintain a brisk walking speed and pass the unfamiliar dog quickly and confidently (keep your dog in the outside position so that you are in between him and the other dog). If no aggression was displayed (i.e., growling, lunging), reward your dog heavily for the positive outcome. If your dog did unfortunately display overt aggression, give him a strong but calm "AAGH" or "NO" and walk briskly past the unfamiliar dog. Do not reward him. After you have passed, put him into the down position for a minute or two. This serves as a reminder to him that you are still the leader and your word is gospel. Remember that if he sees you as the leader, he will be more responsive to your commands even in fear causing situations.

You and your dog will begin learning behavior modification techniques in the coming weeks that should bring about very favorable changes in your dog. It is important not to “jump the gun” by putting your dog into situations in which he has been aggressive in the past. It is critical that you both learn the skills necessary to change your dog’s perceptions of dog-on-dog meetings first.

In the interim you may practice this one simple method to keep your dog’s attention away from oncoming dogs. As you see that your dog has noticed an approaching dog – immediately at that moment – begin to feed him high-value rewards (it is also helpful if you begin your walks before feeding your dog, this will ensure a good response to the treats). This is only an interim effort and does not constitute behavior modification, but it will serve to distract him from his usual aggressive responses.

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