



MANAGEMENT OF FEAR AGGRESSIVE DOGS

(Aggression with humans)

When meeting unfamiliar people, the fear aggressive dog quickly sends signals intending to keep that person 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 human. The approaching person will often send signals of concern or even fear which feeds the vicious circle of aggression. Additionally, fear aggressive dogs often misinterpret normal signals and behaviors that they see in humans. Eye contact alone can begin the fear/aggression cycle.

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 a person 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 humans in your absence. Be certain that your dog is safely indoors or allowed outdoors only if he cannot gain access to people. Equally important is to ensure that your dog does not become highly aroused by having visual access to things that cause him to aggress. If your dog charges the fence growling and bristling every time a person 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 people. 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 stop overt aggression from your 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 walking in situations that have caused aggression in the past, you signal him to become alert and 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 walkers, joggers and bicyclists and immediately begin obedience training. Your attitude should be calm and commanding. Reward heavily for obedience, thereby avoiding a stress trigger.
- If an approach to humans is unavoidable, maintain a brisk walking speed and pass quickly and confidently (keep your dog in the outside position so that you are in between him and the people). 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 pedestrians. 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 meeting people.

In the interim you may practice this one simple method to keep your dog’s attention away from oncoming traffic. As you see that your dog has noticed an approaching person – 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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