



Diagnosing Canine Aggression

Aggression in dogs is usually serious. An aggressive dog can be a danger to you, to other people, to other animals, and to himself. With dedicated application of proper behavior modification techniques aggression can, in some mild cases, be treated or managed. Although aggressive dogs can be dangerous, they are not necessarily bad dogs. In fact, since they are members of our families, we owe it to ourselves, and them, to be honest about unacceptable behavior and to work closely with a professional to modify such behavior.

When dogs are puppies, there are several fun things you can do to help prevent them from developing aggressive behavior. A “puppy class” that focuses on socializing pups with people and other dogs is an excellent place to start. If, however, you think your puppy may be already exhibiting aggressive behavior, consider seeking the help of a professional Behavior Consultant now, while the dog is young.

Recognizing Aggression

Defining what is classified as “aggressive behavior” is not always easy. There are a number of names given to a number of different types of aggression; but what’s really important is being able to recognize aggression in your pet so that you can seek help. The key to determining aggressive behavior is to ***always be observant of your pet***. Too many people seek help only ***after*** their dog has bitten. And many times, when asked why their dog bit, the answer is “for no reason.” Dogs rarely bite “for no reason,” nor do they typically bite without first giving a warning sign or two.

Common warning signs

- Growling at a stranger
- Growling at members of the family
- Growling at someone near his food bowl
- Growling at children

Growling means something. Your dog is trying to communicate with you. If you punish a dog for growling, he will eventually stop - and with that warning mechanism unavailable to him, his next warning signal could be a snap or a bite.

Take note of when growls happen, call a qualified Behavior Consultant and give them every detail. Work with the Behavior Consultant to develop a program that deals directly with what is making your dog uncomfortable enough to growl. Help prevent your dog from having to bite. The fact that he’s growling means he would rather not bite, but something is wrong - wrong enough in his mind for him to elicit a powerful warning.

If Your Dog Has Bitten

If your dog has bitten a person, take careful note of all the details involved by using the following check list:

- Did he bite a visitor in your home or yard?
- Did he bite someone reaching into your car?
- Were you present at the time of the bite?
- Was the person a man or woman? Young or old?
- Was your dog approached by a stranger when he was trapped (in a corner or on a leash) and couldn't run away?
- What was the person wearing (a hat, a uniform)?
- Did the person hurt the dog when the bite occurred or any time in the past?
- Was the person hugging or restraining the dog?
- Did he bite when someone got too near his food bowl or tried to take something out of his mouth?
- Was the person moving away from the dog (on a bike or running) when he bit?

If your dog has bitten another animal, note all details involved by using this check list:

- Was he on a leash at the time of the bite?
- Did the other dog approach first or was your dog the aggressor?
- Had the two dogs met before?
- What was the outcome of the previous meeting?
- Did the dog attack a cat or other small animal?
- Was the animal running from your dog?
- Has your dog attacked any of his canine house mates?
- Was the attack over something (food, rawhide, sleeping space, attention from you)?
- How long have the dogs lived together?
- How old are they?
- How often has it happened?

As you can see, the details involved in diagnosing dog aggression can come right down to the type of shoes the person was wearing at the time, where the person was standing, etc. Any details you can gather will greatly help a Behavior Consultant to develop a program for treating or managing the problem.

For more information about pet behavior and training, please **visit our website at michiganhumane.org**.

