

MONTGOMERY COUNTY ANIMAL SHELTER

PET BEHAVIOR AND TRAINING SERVICES, INC.

AGGRESSION IN DOGS

Written by Pet Behavior and Training Services, Inc. for use by the Montgomery County Animal Shelter

All dogs are individuals, consequently their behavior is also unique. Just as all dogs are different, there are different types and degrees of aggression. There are dogs who show aggression due to insecurity or fear. This type of aggression often occurs when the dog feels pressured or cornered with no escape route. There are other dogs that show aggression to their owners or other family members at times when the owner disturbs them while sleeping, playing with toys, or eating. They may show resistance when stepped over, reached for, or pushed off of the bed. Some dogs can be possessive over food or objects, and guard them against adults or children. Others become territorial around their yard, house or owners car. To complicate the situation, a dog may display more than one type of aggression.

TREATMENT

Just as you have undoubtedly learned many coping skills when confronted with problem situations, your dog can often be taught other, more appropriate ways of behaving in certain situations. There are no specific techniques that work in all situations with all dogs. In order to achieve the best chance of success you should consult your veterinarian or a pet behavior specialist. Dogs who are aggressive can be dangerous.

Every member of the family must cooperate in keeping the necessary restrictions on the dog's life and continue to work the behavior modification techniques necessary to keep the dog's behavior under control.

In general, the more types of aggression the dog has, the longer he has been displaying the aggression, and the more intense or frequent the bouts of aggression, the worse the prognosis. Early treatment is important!

The following suggestions and cautions will provide you with the general strategy for managing aggressive behavior until you can get professional help.

It is important to realize that aggressive behavior is learned and reinforced each time the dog practices this unwanted behavior. Your first goal is to keep people safe and insure that the dog does not practice aggression.

- 1) If the dog displays aggression at the door when visitors come, do not allow the dog to go to the door until you have learned how to teach the dog to behave properly.
- 2) The dog who charges the fence barking, should be kept on a lead or long line and supervised by you to avoid that behavior.
- 3) For the dog that threatens you or other family members, you will need to temporarily avoid situations that cause the aggression so as to not be bitten and to prevent your dog from strengthening the habit of aggression.
- 4) When there is aggression toward children (or even adults) do not leave them and dog unsupervised. Supervision may mean watched only, kept on leash, or in some cases totally removed, depending on the degree of aggression.
- 5) If it is absolutely impossible to avoid an aggressive display, your dog should be calmly and quietly distracted as soon as possible and then taken out of the situation.

Punishment or Training With Positive Reinforcement

Threatening gestures (yelling, raising an arm, reaching for a rolled up newspaper, grabbing the dog's neck or muzzle, rolling him over) or pain are likely to cause an aggressive reaction from any dog. It is wiser to use other methods of interacting with the dog to avoid fear or so that dominance on your part and submission on the dog's part is achieved. One way of doing this is through good obedience training.

Obedience training will help to make your dog more sensitive to you in a very positive way. Obedience will give you a degree of control that is needed for any treatment to be successful. Commands such as "come", "sit", "drop-it", can be used to get the dog off of the bed or to give up a highly coveted item without yelling or chasing him. These commands must be taught before they are needed. While the dog is doing the unwanted behavior is NOT the time to teach. You will want to learn how to use positive reinforcement, in the form of food rewards or praise, for correct behavior.

Remember, if the aggression is caused by fear, punishment will only make the dog more fearful. Trying to punish a dominantly aggressive dog or one who is territorial or possessive is only likely to make the dog more aggressive. Punishment has long been recognized as playing a role in aggression.

Sit For Everything Rule

One of the exercises that you should practice extensively is the "sit" command. Your dog should be required to "sit" before being petted, before being greeted, before being fed, before going outside and coming in. Before doing anything that has value in his life.

This will give you leadership over the dog that thinks he is in charge, and will help the fearful dog feel more secure. It will teach the dog a consistent way of interacting with people and give you a valuable way of managing other nuisance or potentially dangerous behaviors. For example; darting out of the door or jumping on people.

Use treats to teach the dog the pattern, once he learns the command and knows what is expected of him, then life rewards can take over. For example, “If you sit I will pet you.” “If you sit I will put your leash on and take you for a walk.”

Neutering

Neutering your dog may not completely suppress the dog’s aggressive tendencies, but it will decrease the hormonal reasons to act aggressive.

No Rough Play or Tug-Of-War Games

Don’t teach your dog to act aggressive even in play. Some dogs can’t tell the difference.

It is likely that you will have to work with a professional several times in order for you to learn how to teach some obedience skills, timing of rewards, dominant and submissive signals and signs of impending aggression, as well as some behavior modification techniques. These techniques must be done with precision so as not to reward an inappropriate behavior.

If you need help dealing with your dog’s aggression problem you may call us for an appointment at 937-293-5686. If you live outside the area ask your veterinarian for a referral to a pet behavior specialist.

Pet Behavior and Training Services, Inc.

Dayton, Ohio 45410

1407 Business Center Court

937-293-5686

A non-profit organization specializing in the behavior of pets

Montgomery County Animal Shelter

6550 Webster Street

Dayton, OH 45414

937-898-4457