

Aggression in Dogs: An Overview

What is the behavior?

Aggression is a natural behavior, not an aberration. Most aggression is defensive in nature – that is, the dog is reacting to what he perceives as a threat. Behavior is always in flux, and can get worse before it gets better.

If your dog is aggressive, you must decide:

- Whether your dog is too dangerous to work with.
- Whether the behavior can be kept under control by managing the environment.
- Whether you have the ability to modify the behavior.
- Whether you have the time and commitment to do so.

Know your dog and his body language - from behind your dog as well as beside or in front. Dogs, after all, often walk ahead of their owner. (Please review our **Body Language: Speaking "Dog"** handout.)

- Observe your dog's body language when relaxed.
- Observe your dog's body language when tense.
- Observe the DISTANCE between your dog and the object of interest.
- Observe your dog's body language when he is about to attack.
- Observe EXACTLY what sets off your dog: children/other dogs/other male or female dogs/men with beards/people in uniform.

Know your own response to stress.

- Note what you or your family members do when your dog looks like he might aggress or when you are worried while with your dog.

How do you modify the behavior?

This handout will discuss some of the reasons a dog may behave aggressively and is only an overview of aggressive displays.



To build an individualized behavior modification program for your dog's needs, please contact **Behavior & Training** to schedule a consultation.

If your dog is lunging, growling, snapping or has bitten a dog or person or you fear that he will, we **strongly** recommend a consultation with one of our **Behavior Consultants** prior to taking any other actions. Please contact us at OhBehave@MarinHumane.org or 415.506.6280 for assistance.

Sources of Aggression:

Fear:

Fear is the most common cause of aggression. A fearful dog learns what works best and will default to that behavior. Dogs respond to fear with some or all of the following: fleeing, freezing, growling & threatening, or attacking. Dogs can inherit a cautious or fearful temperament. Often dogs become fearful due to a lack of healthy social interactions in their early weeks and months.

Dogs who feel threatened often go through a series of behaviors. Sometimes the progression is slow, very fast or almost non-existent. The response depends on the dog's history and temperament.

- **Anxiety:** I am worried about that scary thing. (Panting, yawning, ears twitching, paws sweating, pupils dilated, skin sensitive to touch, tails under, hackles raised, etc.)
- **Avoidance:** I just won't look at it, and it will go away. I'll just check out this corner over here.
- **Freeze:** If I don't move, no one will see me.
- **Escape:** If I run, it won't hurt me.
- **Threat:** If I look mean, maybe it will go away.
- **Aggression:** I'm going to chase the thing away.
- **Learned Helplessness:** If it doesn't see me, it can't hurt me.

It's best to address the fear in Anxiety and Avoidance above by moving away from the perceived threat or lessening its intensity. For dogs not used to handling, for example, shorter sessions are best. For dogs who actively avoid other dogs or strangers, allowing that space is wise. It's best to allow a dog who is showing fearful behaviors enough time to approach you rather than forcing an interaction.

Trauma:

One common cause of fear-based aggression is a traumatic episode in early life such as being attacked by another dog or abused by a human. The younger the dog is when the trauma occurs, the more lasting the imprint of the event. Often, the dog learns not to trust dogs or people.

Depending on the type and intensity of the trauma **as perceived by the dog**, recovery can sometimes take months or years. In general, a slow approach to new experiences is the best option. A deliberate, thoughtful program of counter conditioning and desensitization would be helpful.

Frustration:

Dogs who tend to bark or lunge at the end of the leash, race up and down a fence-line, or pull frantically from a tie-out are very frustrated. They are probably also afraid (or were afraid in the past) before they learned that they can scare away anyone or anything that appears threatening. Continual frustration can lead to a dog who becomes easily aroused during stressful situations.

Leash reactivity is perhaps the most common and problematic manifestation of frustration. There are many different training techniques to improve this situation. We recommend working with a Behavior Consultant to ascertain which method is best for your dog.

Territoriality:

All dogs are territorial to some extent. Territory can be the area where the dog lives, a car, or even a dog park, if he was in there first. Dogs defending their territory can be extremely dangerous. It is instinctive for them to chase away intruders. Dogs generally begin with chasing or circling and sometimes air biting. If they are successful, the behavior can escalate.

Management of your dog's environment is of paramount importance because this is the place where he learns and practices behaviors. Your dog should never be left alone in the backyard unattended if he has a tendency to lunge against fences or bark at dogs or people. In a walking situation, avoid walking him in environments where he is forced to go directly towards another dog or along fence lines behind which other dogs are barking and lunging. In a vehicle, place him in a crate covered with a light sheet to cut off visual stimulation. It is also a good idea to park away from heavy traffic areas.

Note: Marin Humane urges pet guardians to leave their animal companions at home during warm weather days. Pets, cars and warm days don't mix. Running into the store for "just a minute" can be dangerous for an animal left in a car.

Protection:

Many dogs have a tendency to protect or defend other members of their group. Often they will place themselves between a threatening individual and their family, human or canine. They will often rely on other family members to defend or back them up as well. We sometimes think dogs are protecting us, when they're really counting on us to protect them. Your dog is asking for your protection if he presses up to you when threatened, as opposed to thrusting himself between you and the threat.

If a small dog is in your lap and is growling, this is called **lap guarding**. A good strategy is to place your dog on the floor and walk away from him. If he is attempting to get between you and another dog/person, again, move away from your dog. If your dog gangs up on another dog, separating the dogs physically is a smart strategy.

Resource Guarding:

Many dogs will lay claim to their food, bed or toys and prevent people or dogs from approaching. Resource guarding may be a result of a lack of resources in the early litter raising stage or a perceived lack of resources in the vital growing up years.

Resource guarding of food bowls, toys and beds can be modified. Your dog can be taught to trade for valued items until he learns there is plenty to go around. A decision can also be made to allow your dog to eat their meals undisturbed.

Status-Related:

Dogs of higher status believe they have rights, like first access to food, sleeping places and territory. A high status dog who feels that a low status family member (human or canine) is acting out of their rank might do something about it. This is usually a very quick, disciplinary move such as an air bite or snap. In a family, the dogs most likely to fight are dogs who don't have a clear picture of the structure of the household.



Some minor squabbles are normal, but management of the environment and access to resources are needed to prevent an escalation of behaviors. Dogs benefit from structure. It's a good idea to designate certain sleeping and eating areas. Obedience training for all of the dogs is a smart strategy.

Idiopathic Aggression:

Idiopathic aggression (also referred to as "rage syndrome" or "mental lapse aggression") refers to aggression that occurs for no apparent reason. This is an extremely rare type of aggression that is difficult to study and therefore poorly understood. The characteristics of idiopathic aggression include:

- Attacks occurred most often in social situations
- No identifiable trigger and a total lack of warning from the guardian's point of view
- Intense, explosive aggression
- A glazed look in the dog's eyes before attack. This is attributed to dilated pupils as part of the "fight/flight" response
- Onset in dogs between 1 – 3 years of age
- Certain breeds seem predisposed to this condition, including Cocker and English Springer Spaniels, amongst various other breeds

In the vast majority of aggressive displays there are reasons that a trained observer can discern and a behavior modification program can be effective. Often the culprit is status-related aggression and/or resource guarding as both have violent, aggressive reactions. We suggest you seek the assistance of a professional Dog Behavior Consultant or Veterinarian if you suspect this issue.

Redirected or Displaced Aggression:

Your dog may be trying to get to one target (another dog through a fence) but can't get to it. His excitement and arousal has to go somewhere, so he attacks whatever is closest. This could be his companion dog or even you. One of the most common types of redirected aggression is when people try to intervene during a dogfight and get bitten in the process.

If redirected or displaced aggression happens a lot, an increase in management of your dog's environment is needed. Train your dog to control his arousal and interrupt his behavior. If possible, recall your dog, move further away, block the sight lines to the object of interest, or engage him in another behavior.

Pain- Elicited Aggression:

Given the right circumstances, it's not uncommon for your dog to lash out when in pain. This response is based in fear and protection of themselves. Some dogs will aggress in anticipation of a painful interaction. For example, if nail trimming consistently hurts your dog, he may aggress before nail trimming is done.

Have a strong understanding of the triggers for the aggressive response, especially when it comes to visits to your groomer or vet. All dogs benefit from a slow process of getting them used to the rigors of grooming or the stresses of a visit to the vet's office. (Please review our ***Counter Conditioning*** handout.)

Maternal:

Maternal aggression is a natural defensive behavior towards strangers as displayed by a female with puppies, and sometimes a female who is or has gone through a false pregnancy.

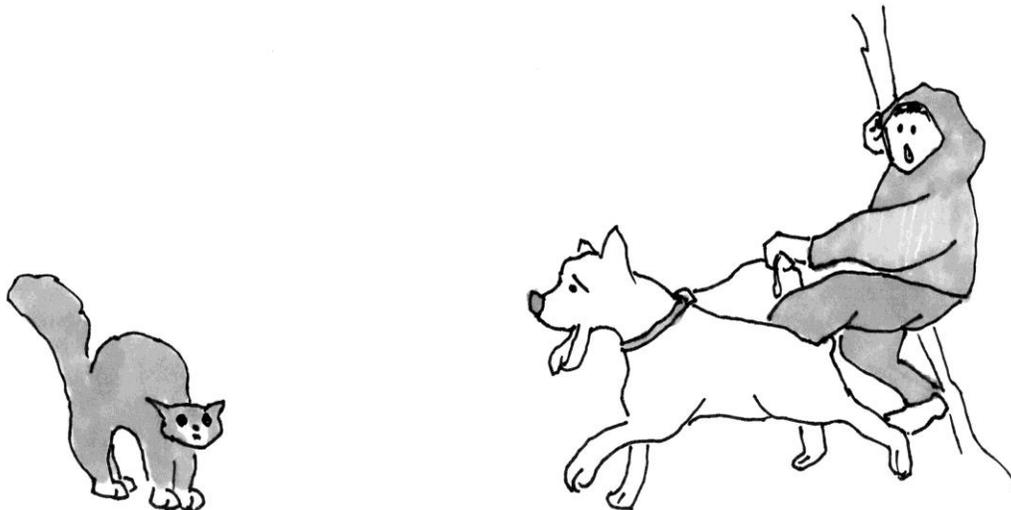
Keep the mother dog safe from perceived threats. Keep other dogs away from the whelping/nursing area and keep human traffic at a minimum. Most maternal aggression will fade after the first three to four weeks after birth of the puppies. This is a very normal and healthy response for a nursing mother.

Predatory:

Predation is not aggression, but rather an instinct to chase and catch food. Predation is usually noiseless and very fast. A dog thwarted from chasing his prey (which can be other dogs, cats, children, bicycles, cars, or joggers) can become highly energized, display displaced or redirected aggression and begin to vocalize (often with a high keening whine).

All dogs perform a Fixed Action Pattern (FAP) when it comes to predation. Some dogs will complete the pattern and others will not. It's important to be able to interrupt the pattern early in its progression to prevent full-on predatory aggression.

Stare → Stalk → Chase → Grab → Bite → Disseminate → EAT!



It is ideal to interrupt your dog at the stare. You can train alternative behaviors like "Find it," which uses part of the hunting pattern to redirect your dog's attention and creates space away from the perceived prey. (Please review our **Find It** and **Leave It** handouts.)

Dog to Dog:

People are a linear species. We tend to move in a straight line towards our goal. In our culture, we also encourage direct eye contact when meeting new people and greeting friends, although we very rarely look directly at strangers we pass on the street.

Dogs do not naturally walk in straight lines. They go this way and that in a zig-zag pattern. Dogs use all their senses when walking. When your dog is moving in a straight line, it is because he has sensed something to investigate. When placed on a leash, many dogs do walk in a straight line because their guardian is pulling back, thus forcing the dog to peer forward with chest thrust out, a position that automatically challenges other dogs.

Most dogs do not look directly at other dogs. If they do so, it is either because they feel threatened or challenged by the other dog, or the other dog is very well known to them (though that is rare). Some breeds are more likely to stare at dogs than others are. Border collies are bred for their “eye,” and many bully breed dogs, Boxers and Pit Bulls, have a tendency to gaze intently at other dogs. This makes the dogs they are looking at quite nervous, and sometimes invites aggression.

Dogs have an intricate and subtle language. Many of our dogs haven’t had the chance to learn this language either because they were separated from their family too soon or there were too few canine teachers on hand.

- **Looking and Moving Away:** A polite dog will slow down and turn his head to the side when seeing an oncoming dog. This tells the other dog that there is no threat. Other similar behaviors include meandering to the side of the road and sniffing at something that suddenly seems very interesting, or turning their back on an oncoming dog. (Please review our **Calming Signals** handout.)
- **Arcing:** When meeting, a polite dog will not move in a straight line. He’ll walk in an arc by curving during an approach. This communicates peaceful intentions to another dog.
- **Greetings:** When two polite dogs actually greet each other, they generally sniff at the juxtaposition of head and neck where there’s an identifying gland, and then around the tail area, where there’s another identifying gland. After greeting, the dogs may decide what to do. Unfortunately, some dogs, perhaps after realizing they don’t know a dog, will posture and even start a fight. Greetings are best kept very short or avoid them all together if your dog is continually challenged in the area.

Training Resources:

Marin Humane’s **Behavior & Training** conducts various training classes. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Remember to license your dog (It’s the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog’s collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn’t require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by Marin Humane, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.

