

# Aggression in Dogs

Understanding Aggression in Dogs

By Sally Varma

It can be a frightening experience when a usually docile, friendly dog suddenly becomes aggressive, growling, or baring its teeth. In some cases, the dog may bite or attack you or a family member it knows well and has never acted against before. It can be difficult to know what to do when your dog shows these signs of hostile behaviour. Since dog aggression can get out of hand and result in injuries to dogs or people, it's very important to find the cause so you can help your dog overcome the aggression.

No dog is born aggressive and it is its surroundings and how the people around behave that shapes a dog's behaviour. Aggression is a reaction to an overwhelming amount of stress generally brought on by a perceived threat which invokes fear and compels the dog to behave defensively.

There is always a trigger for these actions, thus making the behaviour specific and not generalized. In other words, the dog is responding to a certain stimuli within the environment and is not displaying aggressive behaviour randomly. There is no such thing as random aggression or aggression happening "out of the blue". There is always a reason and a cause. It's only a question of whether or not the owners are able to identify these triggers.

Knowing why your dog is acting aggressively can help you figure out the best plan for stopping this frightening behaviour. There are several potential causes of aggression in dogs.

## **1. Illness and Injury:**

Pain is a symptom not a cause for dogs to become aggressive. If a dog that has never shown any sign of aggression suddenly begins growling, snapping, or biting, it may be caused by a disease or illness.

Pain is an especially common cause of aggression in dogs. Your suddenly aggressive dog may have an injury or an illness that's causing major discomfort.

Some possible causes of pain include arthritis, bone fractures, internal injuries, various tumours, and lacerations.

Other illnesses may affect your dog's brain, leading to seemingly unreasonable aggression. Brain diseases or tumours, thyroid disease, and rabies are a few illnesses that may provoke the onset of aggression.

If your dog is exhibiting sudden, unexplained aggression, talk to your veterinarian before attempting to address the behaviour.

You may want to try giving your dog medication if you sense it's in pain or suffering. Don't do this. If your dog is sick, you'll need to know exactly what is wrong with it before you begin any treatment. Don't try to take matters into your own hands until you know what you're dealing with.

## **2. Fear**

A fearful dog can become aggressive. Most dogs only exhibit aggressive behaviour if they sense they're in danger, are unable to escape, and need to defend themselves. This can occur if a dog is backed into a corner with no way out or if it thinks the hand you raised over its head means you're going to hit.

If your dog is a rescue dog that exhibits aggressive or fearful behaviour more than is normal, chances are that it may have been abused. Any information you can get from the shelter where you adopted the dog could help you determine the best way to handle the situation.

## **3. Possessiveness**

Possession aggression, or resource guarding, occurs when a dog is possessive of food, a toy, a bed, your yard, or some other object of value. A dog that exhibits possession aggression may growl if someone approaches its food bowl or gets close when it's chewing a favourite toy.

A dog may also bite a stranger who steps into your home, which is the dog's territory.

#### **4. Frustration**

Aggression that's caused by frustration is often referred to as redirected aggression or barrier frustration. It occurs when a dog is frustrated at not being able to get to something and takes its frustration out in another way. This type of aggression is often seen in dogs that spend a lot of time tied up, restrained on a leash, or behind a fence.

For example, a dog that's chained in a yard may spend the day straining to get to a dog that lives across the street or in an adjacent yard. The restrained dog usually barks and growls more fiercely as the frustration grows. When the owner approaches, the dog may redirect its frustration and bite the owner.

#### **5. Establishing Dominance**

Dogs sometimes show aggression to establish dominance. This is more commonly directed toward other dogs, but it can occur with people as well.

Dogs that display this type of aggression feel that they must prove they're in charge of a situation. The growling, snapping, or biting occurs when they feel their position is being challenged. Unfortunately, people often mistake the cause of canine aggression as dominance-related behaviour when there may be another cause.

#### **6. Sex-related aggression**

Two male dogs become aggressive when they are trying to get the attention of a female dog and a mother dog always gets aggressive when she feels that her puppies are under threat.

Be careful not to misinterpret your dog's aggression. Always rule out a health issue or fear before you assume you know the reason for your dog's aggressive behaviour. A lot of times people don't take the effort to try and understand why a dog is behaving the way it is and this is the reason that a lot of pet dogs get abandoned by owners.

Punishing your dog for aggressive behaviour usually backfires and can escalate the aggression. If you respond to a growling dog by hitting or yelling, it may feel the need to defend itself by biting you. Punishment may also lead to your dog biting someone else without warning. For example, if your dog growls at children, it's

letting you know that it's uncomfortable around them. If you punish your pet for growling, it may not warn you the next time it gets uncomfortable. It may simply bite.

There are a number of ways you can manage the hostility and help your dog remain calm, but it will take time and patience. The beauty of dogs is that they're always telling us how they feel. There's no hiding their emotional state. Stress and joy are both equally displayed in a dog's body. Yet when humans or owners don't understand enough to learn those body cues or turn a blind eye to signs of distress, the dog quickly learns that no one is coming to their aid in a time of perceived crisis. That's when they take matters into their own hands (or paws). That's when you begin to see defensive displays of dog aggression take form.

Millions of dogs get abandoned or killed due to this label of "aggression" which we throw around so easily without little thought as to how we contribute to it. It's time we become more aware and understand these beautiful animals better