

Understanding Dog to Dog Aggression



Living with a dog aggressive dog can be very difficult, especially if you live in a neighborhood or an apartment where there are lots of other dogs. Aggressive behavior is part of the range of normal behavior for dogs – this does not mean that it isn't problematic though. Growling, snapping, snarling, barking, lunging, and biting are all forms of aggressive behavior. In most cases these behaviors are warning signs meant to send a message when all others have been ignored. If the message is ignored, the warning can quickly escalate to more overt displays of aggression.

Why does your dog do this?

Aggression towards dogs can start with a single bad exposure or may be due to a lack of exposure. Aggressive behavior is usually meant to increase the distance between the aggressive dog and the dog being aggressed. If your dog is behaving aggressively he is likely saying that he needs to get away from the other dog.

What does your dog do (what does it look like)?

Many times when we think of aggression we think of growling, barking, lunging, snapping and biting but often the dog has given many warning signals prior to these behaviors that went ignored. Warning signals can include the attempt to disengage by moving away, looking away, sniffing the ground, yawning, lip licking, staring, and baring teeth just to name a few. To learn more about these behaviors let's look at some charts of aggressive behavior.

[Ladder of Aggression](#)

The ladder of Aggression chart details many of the body language signals that happen before an aggressive episode.

Additional Resources

Please contact our Behavior Team to speak with a skilled behavior specialist.

BehaviorTeam@spca.org

214-461-5169

www.spca.org/petuniversity

See also:

Aggression section at www.spca.org/pettips

[Reactivity Chart](#)

The reactivity chart shows a progression of the dog's behavior from calm to aggressive.

[Calming Signals](#)

Calming signals are behaviors that dogs will use to attempt to reduce conflict before resorting to aggressive behaviors.

[Cara Shannon's Dog Bite Scale](#)

This dog bite scale details the type of damage that each bite and the prognosis of each type of bite.

What you need to know.

Any dog is capable of behaving aggressively given the right situation. It is up to you to keep your dog from causing damage, especially under conditions that you know might provoke him. It is also extremely important that you learn to read and understand your dog's body language so you can mitigate the occurrence of any aggressive episodes.

Aggression is a learned behavior and it generalizes very quickly. Once the dog has displayed aggressive behavior and received some sort of perceived benefit – from the dog's perspective – then the behavior has been reinforced. Any behavior that is reinforced is likely to happen again.

What's Next?

In most situations, aggression towards other dogs can be managed by not exposing your dog to other dogs except in a few circumstances such as going to the vet. Even at the vet, contact with other dogs can be minimized by keeping your dog in the car until your exam room is available.

If you would like to work on modifying your dog's aggressive behavior, contact a skilled trainer or behavior specialist. The trainer should use modern training techniques that do not involve using force or intimidation to change behavior. Positive reinforcement training reinforces all other behaviors besides aggression making those behaviors more likely to occur in the future. Punishment based training reduces the aggressive behavior but does not teach the dog what to do instead. This can cause fallout resulting in less calming signals and dogs that become aggressive with "no warning."

[Dominance in Dog Training, AVSAB Position Statement](#)
[Schedule a session with a Pet University trainer](#)

