

Aggressive Behavior in Dogs

Aggressive behavior is part of the range of normal behavior for dogs--which doesn't mean it isn't problematic. Growling, snapping, barking, lunging, and biting are all forms of aggressive behavior. In most cases these are warning signals, meant to send a message--but if the message is ignored, the warning can quickly escalate into true aggression.

It's important to deal with these problems promptly. Don't ignore your dog's aggressive behavior hoping that it will go away. It may get worse instead.

Types of Aggressive Behavior

Fear-based. A dog may act in ways that we consider aggressive when it is anxious and feeling threatened. This behavior could more accurately be called "defensive" than "aggressive," and it's the leading cause of dog bites.

It's important to remember that what matters is how the dog feels; we may not mean to frighten a dog or we may not see why they're afraid, but if the dog perceives a threat, they'll react. Some examples are dogs who bark when a stranger approaches, even if the stranger doesn't seem threatening to us, or a dog who growls and moves away when someone stares at them or raises a hand.

Dogs who are temperamentally anxious, or who haven't had enough socialization to be comfortable in lots of different situations, may be fearfully aggressive when confronted with something or someone outside their comfort zone.



Additional Resources

Dealing with your dog's aggression often requires the help of a professional.

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

BehaviorTeam@spca.org

214-461-5169

www.spca.org/petuniversity

Don't punish your dog for aggression; this is likely to have negative side effects. Remember that a dog that is acting aggressively is already aroused and anxious.

Applying an aversive stimulus – such as yelling at the dog or jerking their leash – will only increase the anxiety and make the dog react even more strongly to the perceived threat.

Territorial or protective. A dog may use aggressive displays in defense of property (territorial) or a person or other animal (protective). A mother dog with young puppies may be particularly protective.

Possessive. Also called resource guarding, this type of aggressive behavior occurs when a dog protects food, toys, or other objects.

Redirected. This comes about when a dog is reacting to someone or something they can't get to. They redirect their aggressive behavior toward a person or other animal they can get to. This can often happen when a dog is behind a barrier, or when dogs are fighting and people reach in to separate them.

What to Do and What Not to Do

- ◆ Consult a dog behavior specialist with experience in working with problems related to aggression. Aggressive behavior is complex, and if you use the wrong approach in dealing with it you can make the situation worse.

An SPCA of Texas Pet University Trainer can show you positive ways to help your dog learn to feel less anxious and curb this aggressive response. Contact our Behavior Helpline by visiting www.sPCA.org/petuniversity

- ◆ See a veterinarian to check for medical causes for aggressive behavior.
- ◆ Spay or neuter your dog. How well this works may depend on whether your dog has already developed a habit of aggression.
- ◆ While you're getting help and working on the problem, keep everyone--your family, visitors, other pets, and your dog--safe, however you need to. Remember, you are liable for your dog's behavior. Also keep your dog out of situations where they may be provoked into showing aggression.
- ◆ If you must walk the dog in public, be sure the person walking the dog is capable of restraining the dog with the leash if necessary.
- ◆ Don't punish your dog for aggression; this is likely to have negative side effects. Remember that a dog that is acting aggressively is already aroused and anxious. Applying an aversive stimulus – such as yelling at the dog or jerking their leash – will only increase the anxiety and make the dog react even more strongly to the perceived threat.

Also, the dog is likely to associate the punishment with the object triggering the aggression. For instance, if a dog is corrected with leash jerks for growling at an unfamiliar person, they may connect the pain in their neck with the person they're growling at. That person--and other unfamiliar people--will now seem even more threatening to the dog, escalating the aggressive behavior.