

# Let's Learn About

## Types of Aggression



The purpose of this section is to inform you of different types of dog aggression. It is important to be able to recognize what form of aggression an animal is performing so that it can be dealt with in an appropriate behavior modification program. It is vital that a professional always deal with dog aggression. Often, dog owners choose to ignore aggression or avoid situations that illicit aggression. This does not fix the problem and can leave owners walking on egg shells around their dogs. Therefore it is important that aggression be addressed and treated no matter how insignificant it may seem. Your dog will be happier and healthier for the work you put in to their behavior modification. Most of these issues are things that can easily be dealt with given the right amount of education and patience.

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An animal who has never been thwarted never learns to deal with frustration, creating low thresholds for frustration. This causes the dog to be reactive when he is placed in a frustrating situation. In short, lack of structure will destroy the dog.

- Brenda Aloff

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**Control Conflict • Fear • Idiopathic • Dog-to-dog • Learned • Maternal • Neophobia  
Pain-Related • Play • Possessive • Possessive–Food Related • Predatory • Protective  
Redirected Aggression • Territorial**

**Control Conflict Aggression** stems from a dog struggling to cope with insecurity; a dog displaying control conflict aggression is unpredictable and will use aggression to reassert his status in environmental situations that he feels he does not have control of. The behavior is exhibited over a wide range of contexts, not just in one particular location or over one specific item such as food. This display of aggression is not simply just “dominance.” Dogs that fall under this category are consistently and unpredictably aggressive in very low-stimulus environments. For example, a dog in this category that is sleeping or resting heavily may react aggressively to the slightest change in environment – a slight touch, slight movement, or even a gentle breeze could solicit a reaction on to the nearest human or sometimes on to another dog.

- Dog is obsessive about rank order
- Needs control over environment
- Low stimulus situations may trigger unpredicted aggression
- Intolerant to being touched
- Little or no warning signs/inconsistent warnings



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**Fear Aggression** is often displayed by animals who have a very low-threshold for fear. They may become defensive and bite even when a threat is non-existent. An example of fear aggression might be found in an animal coming from a commercial breeding facility (CBF) that has had little contact with humans its whole life. A CBF dog might sneak up behind a person, bite, and then run away. There is usually no imminent threat to the animal. Usually a dog in this category would first choose to hide from human contact; their second choice would be to bite out of fear if cornered.

- Overt signs of sympathetic nervous system responses
  - Hair raised
  - Rapid breathing
  - Sweaty paws/nose
  - Loss of bowel control
  - Dilated pupils
- Shaking and/or trembling
- Often directed towards humans as a result of inappropriate punishment
- Avoidance behaviors

**Idiopathic Aggression** is often referred to as “rage syndrome” or “Springer Rage Syndrome” to portray that this behavior is often found in Spaniel breeds. This kind of aggression is often a result of a seizure-related disease or other neurological disorder. An example of an animal that might be displaying this aggression would be an animal that is resting calmly in its owner’s lap one moment and attacking its’ owner the next moment. Dogs in this category are extremely unpredictable and should receive a full work-up from the veterinarian to rule out any medical causes.

- Idiopathic means “for no reason”
- Unpredictable
- Extreme force and violence
- May attack dogs, humans or inanimate objects
- Usually found in younger dogs; 1-3 years of age
- May look confused or become very still before the attack

**Dog-to-Dog Aggression** Sometimes two dogs simply don’t get along. If your dog has growled or barked at another dog, however, do not assume he has dog-to-dog aggression. Dogs that fall under this category consistently ignore friendly greeting signals from other dogs and are constantly ready to attack when another dog approaches. Do not confuse this category with possessive aggression of the owner. Dogs will exhibit this behavior with or without its owner present and in any environmental setting.

- Consistent aggressive responses to other dogs in the absence of threat behavior from the other dog
- Actively “looks for” trouble with other dogs

**Learned Aggression** Dogs that fall under this category have usually stumbled upon aggression as a tool for getting what it wants. They have learned that aggression works and have continued to use aggression because it is reinforced by humans. For example, an animal that is protective over its toys may use aggression anytime he feels a human is going to take away his toy. If a person reaches for the toy and the animal snaps, the person will undoubtedly pull away and not try again. The animal has thus learned that snapping or showing aggression will let him keep his toy. The solution to this example would be to learn how to trade with the dog. Instead of trying to take his toy away, give him another toy instead. The dog will learn that taking away his toys is okay and that he does not need to show aggression. It is vital that aggression never be reinforced. It is also vital that this be worked on with an appropriate dog trainer.

- Dogs who exploit the fact that aggression works
- Usually coexists with another form of aggression
- Dogs will continue aggression if the behavior is enforced



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**Maternal Aggression** Usually dogs that experience maternal aggression will return to normal behavior once her hormonal levels return to normal.

- Hormonal changes or inherited temperament can cause a new mother to attack someone who approaches her puppies
- Defensive behavior; protects toys, bedding and puppies
- Symptoms will abate as hormonal state changes

**Neophobia** is an intense fear in new situations. Dogs under this category display aggression as a result of this tremendous fear. Some dogs can experience neophobia and not display aggression. This is different from fearful aggression in that it only occurs in new situations or with new locations or objects.

- Reacts fearfully to every new situation, location or object
- An inability to adapt to anything unfamiliar
- Strong inherited component
- May be caused by isolation during crucial developmental stages

**Pain-related aggression** Pain in dogs is variable and subjective. Humans really have no way of knowing whether an animal is in as much pain as is portrayed by the level of aggression. Aggression can occur even before pain occurs as an anticipatory action due to past events.

- Injured animals may become defensive if you attempt to approach
- Dog uses more than necessary force to indicate that what you are doing is hurting them

**Play Aggression** is not the same as a dog who plays rough, although rough play can escalate into play aggression. The dog will play well for a short while but once a certain threshold of stimulation is exceeded, the dog turns play behavior into threatening actions. Dogs with play aggression do not have normal social responses to other dogs; they may not understand or choose to ignore calming signals or play signals. Play aggression can be directed onto another dog or human. Encouraging rough play during puppyhood can lead to play aggression once puppies become adult dogs.

- Play behavior escalates into intense threatening actions
- Easily aroused
- Dog does not use distance-decreasing signals
- Ignores calming signals of other dogs

**Possessive Aggression** a dog may use confrontational behavior to retain a high valued object or location. The object's importance is defined by the dog and not related to status issues of the dog in relation to other dogs. This aggression may be towards a human or other animal. The dog will often give clear warning signals through defensive or assertive postures that they are guarding something of high value to them.

- Actively and consistently uses aggression to retain a high value object
- difficulty relinquishing toys or objects
- defensive or assertive postures
- often apparent from a very young age

**Possessive Aggression – Food Related** The same rules apply here as with possessive aggression, only the high valued object is an edible item such as a rawhide, bone, or food of another nature. Although all children should be monitored when around dogs (including your own dog) it is important to be extra vigilant where food is apparent. It is quite easy for food to fall on the floor and a child and dog to reach for it at the same time. If a dog has food-guarding aggression, this could be a recipe for disaster.

- Possessive aggression in the presence of high value food items
- never approach or reach for a dog when it is eating; especially if you do not know the dog



**Predatory Aggression** Predatory behavior is a natural instinct in dogs. All of behavior that goes along with chasing, fetching, shaking and carrying toys around are forms of predation. Some forms of predatory behavior are desirable in certain breeds such as in herding breeds that utilize stalking behavior. Predatory behavior can become predatory aggression, however, when it is directed on something other than prey, perhaps including: another dog during a play session, young children, runners, cyclists or disabled persons.

- Different From Predatory Behavior
- “Quiet” Aggression
  - Intense Stares
  - Quiet Approaches
  - Body-lowering
  - Tail-twitching
  - Salivating
  - Stalking
- No Warning Vocalizations
- Accidentally Predatory Targets May Include: Infants, Toddlers, Disabled Persons And Cyclists

**Protective Aggression** is defensive behavior that occurs in the presence of a third-party (often an owner) in the absence of any threat. Most often this aggression is rooted in the dog owner’s behavior, who is most often the subject of protection by the dog. Dogs often misinterpret their handler/owner’s nervousness when a third-party approaches and feel they must protect them. Puppies that are encouraged to protect owners often take their roles very seriously and develop stronger guarding behavior as they enter adulthood.

- Consistent or predominant response to third-party approaches
- Constant scanning of the environment
- Barking or lunging at approach of a third party
- Will place himself in between the person being protected and the person approaching
- Different from distinguishing and acting upon an actual threat

**Redirected Aggression** occurs in situations when a dog is in a highly aroused state and takes its frustrations out on a third-party. The third party could be another dog, a cat, a squirrel, a human, or even an inanimate object. Overstimulation will cause a dog to unload its frustration onto the nearest target. For example, when a doorbell rings two dogs may run to the door together. They are barking and lunging at whomever is coming in the door and are frustrated because they cannot get at the guest. As a result one or both dogs will redirect their frustration onto each other.

- Aggression that is consistently directed toward a third party when the dog is prevented from directing the behavior toward the original target
- Different from accidental aggression
- Vulnerable areas are territory entry areas

**Territorial Aggression** is another form of aggression often encouraged by dog owners. When dogs are allowed to practice guarding a particular area they take the job very seriously and do not realize that humans decide who enters that territory, not them. They will not back down when they decide that an intruder is indeed an intruder on their territory. Some territories are established over long periods of time (a family room) while others can take moments to establish as territory (a street corner the dog has just peed on).

- Dog defends a specific area; usually a familiar area
- Defended against all parties that the dog decides are intruders
- Area may be established over a long period or short period of time

Source:

Aloff, Brenda. *Aggression in Dogs: Practical Management, Prevention, and Behaviour Modification*. Collierville, TN: Fundcraft, 2002. 99-113. Print.



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