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Preventing and Handling Aggression in Dogs

Most puppies are friendly and playful, but as dogs mature, they may become increasingly harder to control. Although genetic factors do play an important role in behavioral development, how you handle, train, and control your new puppy is also critical in shaping its adult behavior.

Canids (e.g., wolves, dogs) are a highly social "pack" species that develop a hierarchy among individuals within the pack. This allows the group to live together with minimal confrontation. In a pair of individuals, one will usually emerge as dominant. This is the leader who controls food, mates, and sleeping areas and usually comes out on top in conflicts. By contrast, the subordinate gives in or backs down, rather than challenging.

In the home, it is important to understand a dog's instinct and work to prevent the dog from seizing control or exhibiting inappropriate behavior. Otherwise, you may soon find that the dog is unwilling to obey commands and may even challenge you when you try to approach, handle, or control it. Dogs displaying such behavior may be exhibiting signs of dominance aggression. Some dogs, even those that are not particularly domineering, can be overly possessive or protective of valued objects, such as food or a favored toy. Another common cause of aggression is fear, which can make the dog bite or act defensive when challenged, confronted, or punished.

The dog of choice

Although studying puppies can be helpful in determining personality, many problems such as fearful or possessive behavior may not develop until long after you select your puppy. Therefore, it might be more valuable to research the typical behavior of the breed. Take a close look at both the parents and offspring from previous litters and see what behavior other family members exhibit. When selecting an adult dog or older puppy, temperament and personality testing will be more valuable since the dog's personality is already formed. For specific information on testing a dog's personality, ask your veterinarian or a pet behaviorist.

Handling your hound

By setting up your dog to succeed, most problems can be prevented. Constant supervision ensures that desirable behavior is rewarded and undesirable behavior is interrupted. Keeping your puppy on a leash can also help. Training your dog to obey verbal commands and accept all forms of handling are important in gaining control and leadership and should begin from day one. Although physical punishment should be avoided, reward-based techniques—rewarding your dog with food, favored toys, and praise when it displays good behavior—are the best ways to teach your puppy.

(For more training techniques, see the article, *Basic Training: Teaching Your Puppy to Mind its Manners*.)

Your dog should get used to accepting all forms of handling without resisting or showing fear or anxiety. At some point you will need to handle or lift your dog, bathe or groom it, brush its teeth, clean in or around its ears and eyes, or trim its nails. In addition, you should be able to gently grasp around the muzzle or hold your puppy

in a down position on its belly or side. These forms of handling should be practiced regularly with rewards given for compliance. Pushy puppies are likely to struggle and resist, so you will need to be persistent, but never force the puppy to a point where it causes fear, retaliation, or escape. If you reach a part of the body or a type of handling that your puppy resists, proceed gradually until your dog becomes accustomed to the handling and accepts it. Rewards can be given for each successful step.

When adult dogs are lifted or handled in a way they are not used to, it can lead to fear or dominance-related forms of aggression. If you identify any resistance or threats, immediately cease and seek the guidance of your veterinarian or a behaviorist. With assistance, your dog can be properly trained to accept these forms of handling.

Drop it!

Possessive behavior or guarding over food, toys, and objects can emerge at any time as a puppy grows up. A number of actions can be taken to help prevent problems before they emerge. However, should your dog begin to display any aggression when in the possession of food or objects, immediately seek the guidance of a veterinarian or behaviorist. This way, you can determine a safe and effective way to correct the problem. The first step in preventing this type of guarding is to teach your dog to give up objects on command. Begin with a toy that is of minimal appeal and teach your dog to "give" the toy to you for rewards. You may need to prompt your dog with a treat the first time, but each time thereafter the food should be hidden and given only after your dog gives up the object. Once your dog reliably drops objects for rewards with each command, switch to intermittent food reinforcement (praise each time and food occasionally).

Although it's best not to bother a dog during meals, it is important that the dog understand that you control resources such as food and toys. Your dog should also be comfortable when family members are around during meals.

Power plays

Of course puppies will not be trained immediately, and some dogs can be very difficult to train, even with the best of efforts. Problems often develop when the owner first allows or is unable to control the pushy behavior—pulling on walks, jumping up on greeting, nipping, or sleeping on furniture—and then later attempts to stop the problem. Dealing with these situations before they become problems is critical.

Whenever your dog begins to exhibit pushy, demanding, undesirable, or over-exuberant behavior, it should be ignored so that the behavior is not encouraged. Another option is to use a verbal command such as "quit" or "off." Dogs that are mouth-oriented, stubborn, excitable, or hard to train can be better controlled with a leash and head halter. Unless your dog is responsive to your commands, games such as tug-of-war and rough-house wrestling should be avoided. These games are never acceptable if your dog initiates them, if they escalate into aggressive displays of nipping and growling, or if you are unable to stop them at will.

Even with the best of efforts, aggression problems can arise. By immediately identifying what causes the aggression, you improve your chances of resolving the problem. If you are having difficulty gaining control of your dog, or should aggression begin to emerge, contact your veterinarian immediately. Together, you can determine if help from a pet behaviorist is necessary.