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Dog Behavior Problems – Aggression – Getting Started – Safety and Management

How do I start treatment of my aggressive dog?

If your dog has threatened or displayed any signs of aggression, then the problem is likely to continue until appropriate steps can be taken to identify the cause and modify the pet's behavior. Therefore, a necessary first step is prevention and avoidance of further incidents. Not only is this essential to ensure safety, but each aggressive display may actually serve to increase the chances that the aggressive behavior will continue.

Why will aggression worsen with each event?

Aggression is most often intended to increase the distance between the dog and the stimulus (e.g., person, other pet, car).

Whenever a bark, threat, or aggressive display leads to retreat of the stimulus, the dog's behavior has been reinforced (negative reinforcement) and the behavior is likely to increase. Similarly, if the owner removes the dog from the situation (which may be necessary for safety), then the threat has been removed (another form of negative reinforcement). In addition, if the approaching stimulus is anxious, fearful or in any way threatening, the dog's anxiety or fear will be enhanced.

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The manner in which the owner responds may also further aggravate the problem. If the owner shows any anxiety or fear, the dog may see this as further reason to be anxious or fearful assuming the owner is afraid of the stimulus rather than being upset by the dogs' behavior. If the owner uses discipline, punishment or corrective techniques such as choke, jerk, prong, or shock, the dog may become increasingly more fearful as it pairs these negative outcomes with the approach of the stimulus. Even when these techniques are successful at stopping the behavior in the short term, they actually add to an anxious emotional state (see Why Punishment Should Be Avoided).

What if the stimulus confronts the pet rather than retreating?



Confronting the pet is potentially dangerous and counterproductive in trying to reduce fear and anxiety. Safety and owner control must first be ensured before any exposure to the stimulus is attempted.

How long will I need to prevent exposure to problems before I can start behavior modification?

This will vary from case to case and problem to problem. You will need to work with your behavioral consultant to determine how to safely and effectively begin exposure exercises to the people, places and situations that lead to aggression. In general, the dog is going to need to learn new tasks and be able to perform them well before exposure to situations can occur. Since any dog can bite depending on its genetics, previous experiences, and the specific circumstances, some prevention and management may be still be required even when behavior modification is successful. There may always be situations that are not safe and those must be avoided. The behavioral assessment and consultation should provide you with guidance as to which aggressive situations might be improved.

How can I ensure safety?

The first step is to identify each and every situation in which fear, anxiety, or aggression might arise. Your dog may show aggression in various ways including stiffening, raising of the hair (hackles) on the back of the neck, growling, snarling (lifting lips and showing teeth), lunging, snapping or biting.

By recognizing all stimuli (e.g., person, another animal, type of vehicle), situations, locations, and types of handling that might incite aggression, it should be possible to develop an initial strategy whereby each of these situations can be prevented or avoided. If it is not practical to prevent every situation that might lead to aggression, then additional safety measures may need to be considered or the pet may need to be removed from the home (see Getting Started and Aggression - Introduction).

What forms of physical control can be used as aids?

1. Leash or tie down: Aggression can be prevented if a responsible adult to whom the dog does not display aggression restrains the dog on a leash at a sufficient distance from the stimulus. Similarly tying the dog to a secure base may serve to temporarily prevent access to the stimulus. However, these techniques rely on the security afforded by the person holding the leash, and are best used in combination with avoidance. Remember that even if the dog is well controlled this does not guarantee that the stimulus (people, other pets) can be controlled. A dog should never be left unattended while in a tie down.

2. Crates and confinement: If your dog is trained to settle in an area where it can be effectively confined (e.g., a crate, room, pen or outdoors), it can be placed in this area at times when a problem might arise. Times when this might be appropriate include a) when food is being prepared b) when food is being consumed c) when visitors arrive d) any other situations where aggression is possible. Be certain that the dog is comfortable, securely restrained, and contented during confinement (see Crate Training – Positive Confinement – Why to Crate Train, Crate Training – Guide – How to Crate Train and Crate Training – Synopsis).
3. Muzzles: A muzzle can also help to ensure safety, especially if the dog must be placed in a situation where aggression might be possible (see Muzzle Training).
4. Head halter: A leash and head halter is often the most practical means of maintaining physical control. It can prevent the dog from approaching a potential problem situation, and if the dog displays aggression, its head can be reoriented and its mouth can be closed. In addition, head halters can be an excellent means of safely controlling and calming the dog during exposure training (see Training Products – Head Halter Training and Training Products: Head Halter Training – Synopsis).



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How can I ensure safety if my dog may become aggressive toward people or animals outdoors?

If your dog shows aggression, threats, or chase attempts while on its walks, you may initially need to avoid walks unless you can find a location or time of day when there are no people or animals around. If you should meet another person or animal on a walk, be certain that your dog is restrained on a leash and kept at a sufficient distance where it can be calmed and controlled. A head halter can aid in safety and control, and can help to redirect the dog's focus away from the people or other animals. When taking your dog out in public, you must use either a head halter or a muzzle to prevent any possibility of injury. In addition, you must never allow the dog off leash except in areas where there is no possibility that other animals or people will arrive, or unless your come and recall command is effective at all times. If it is not practical to prevent every situation that might lead to aggression, then additional safety measures may need to be considered.

How can I ensure safety if my dog may be aggressive toward visitors?



Dogs that display threats or aggression to visitors to your home should be confined before the visitor enters. Alternately, your dog might be restrained with a leash at sufficient distance from the visitor to ensure safety. Adults with control over the pet should be the only ones to assume this role. Remember that you must not only control and prevent your dog's access to visitors but also control and prevent your visitors' access to the dog. This is particularly important with children and even some adults who may not understand the risks associated with approaching your dog. A head halter or muzzle can provide added safety if the dog is allowed to approach the visitor or if the visitor begins to approach the dog.

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How can I ensure safety if my dog may be aggressive over food or toys?

Initially, food should only be given in a location where the dog can be confined until its food is finished, or until such time as your dog will willingly exit the area and leave its food behind (at which point any left over food should be removed). If the dog is protective of chew toys or treats, these items should only be given when the dog is confined to its area (see Aggression – Possessive – Objects and Toys and Aggression – Possessive – Food Bowl).

How can I ensure safety if my dog may be aggressive with stolen objects?

Dogs that might become aggressive when in possession of something of value to it should not be given these objects. The dog must be prevented from stealing by dog proofing the home, keeping the pet supervised on leash, or by confining the dog away from these objects. Leash and head halter supervision or a basket muzzle can be used to ensure that the dog does not get hold of anything over which it might become possessive and protective. If you notice that your dog has something in its possession that could lead to aggression, you should ignore your dog until it walks away unless you can get the dog to leave the object and come to you by offering a favored treat, toy or walk (see Teaching Give and Drop).

How can I ensure safety if my dog might be aggressive if outside or left alone in the yard?

Dogs that might be aggressive in these situations should always be supervised by an adult when outdoors, with the aid of a leash and head halter or muzzle if there is any chance of strangers getting too close. Never leave your dog outside unsupervised unless the yard or dog run is inescapable and is securely locked so that people cannot get in and out and so that they cannot reach through or over the fence to get access to the dog. No dog should ever be left outside when no one is home.

How can I ensure safety if my dog is aggressive toward other dogs or other pets in my home?

These types of aggression can be difficult and sometimes impractical to improve. Therefore, safety and prevention steps may be necessary both in the short term and in the long term. To start, it is necessary to completely separate the pets except when directly supervised by a responsible adult. While under direct supervision, use a leash, head halter and leash, or muzzle for safety. It may be possible to identify the specific situations in which aggression might arise, and either avoid these situations, separate the dogs at these times, or use a leash, leash and head halter or muzzle at these specific times.

How can I ensure safety if my dog is aggressive toward family members?

Aggression toward family members is another problem that can be difficult to prevent unless you can determine the specific types of handling and interactions that lead to aggression. If they can be identified, either avoid the situations or put a leash and head halter or muzzle on the dog at these times. For example, dogs that are aggressive when you are preparing or consuming food should be confined at these times. Dogs that might be aggressive when disturbed if sleeping or resting should be taught to sleep in their own resting areas where they can be avoided or ignored. Dogs that are aggressive when they go under beds or tables should have their access to these areas prevented. Sometimes, by leaving a leash attached, the owner can calmly and safely coax the dog to approach, especially if the dog is wearing a head halter and rewards are used.

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However, some of these dogs will become aggressive when you grab for the leash. If the aggression cannot be entirely prevented and especially if children are at risk, it may be necessary to confine the dog at all times, and to allow it out only for play, training and social interactions (provided there is no aggression at these times). If necessary a leash and head halter can be left attached, or the dog should wear a basket muzzle at all times when it is not confined. If the dog displays aggression when applying the leash and head halter or the muzzle, or if one of these is not attached to the dog when it attempts to bite, it may be impossible to ensure your safety. In some cases, there may be no starting point that is sufficiently safe. Aggression toward family members is another problem that can be difficult to prevent unless you can determine the specific types of handling and interactions that lead to aggression.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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