



Behavior and Training Department Behavior Resources

Aggression is a Dirty Word

Words can hurt, and when someone calls your dog “aggressive” it can hurt a lot. Examining the word and its various permutations can help clarify what is and is not aggression.

Though it would seem to be contradictory, the vast amount of behavior labeled aggressive is actually defensive. For instance dogs – like people – have a personal space. If you intrude on that space, some dogs become somewhat alarmed – you’re too close for comfort. A dog that feels uncomfortable because another dog or person is too close has just two options – to flee or to ask them to back off. If she decides to flee, she has to have somewhere to go, which is practical if she’s not on a leash and she’s in a large enough space. However, if the dog is on a leash or in a confined area and someone intrudes on her personal space, she must use her communication skills to move them away. Lacking language, her choices are again limited, although other dogs and people can (and should) learn to read her body language. Her first choice is likely to be freezing in place. She figures this should communicate that she does not welcome the strange dog’s proximity, and she’s deciding what to do next. Often, the dog’s mouth will close as she freezes. (The only time freezing isn’t a warning is when dogs are playing – in which case it’s accompanied by play bows, widely wagging tails, and open mouths.)

If the intruder (for so she sees it) doesn’t heed the warning, she may growl, and may or may not take on an expression that is very difficult to misread – it’s called an “agonistic pucker.” Her lips will retract and she’ll show her weapons – her teeth. Growling and snarling do NOT mean the dog will bite; they are intended to communicate that she wishes the intruder to stop or to retreat. If he doesn’t, then stronger action will have to be taken. Generally, that’s an air bite. She snaps, but intentionally misses. If that doesn’t work, she may put on a display, acting as though she’s fighting, but never biting down. Finally, if nothing else works, she may have to bite. A bite is almost always a last resort.

Imagine you’re at a restaurant, and someone you don’t know walks up to you and says, “Hi.” You might nod politely at him and say, “Hello”, back, then return to your meal. You signaled him by your body language that you don’t wish to chat. But instead of retreating, the stranger comes closer and sits in another chair at the table. You’re still trying to be polite, so you tell him you don’t want any company, and look pointedly away from him. He takes your hand. Now you actually must do something – he has intruded into your personal space and you’re feeling alarmed. You stand up and tell him in no uncertain terms that you want him to go away. If he persists, you might actually yell at him. An onlooker who didn’t see the whole scenario might think you’re acting aggressively. You know that everything you did was defensive – you had to take action.

Now put yourself and your dog back on that walk and think about a young dog bounding up to your dog, trying to be friendly. However, your dog doesn’t want to visit with anyone. She goes through the whole warning progression to no avail. When she reaches the air bite stage, the other dog’s owner accuses your dog of being aggressive. Because, of course, everyone knows that all dogs are supposed to be friendly. Truth is, dogs are like people and don’t get along with every other dog.

Another sort of aggression is possessive aggression – food or toy guarding. This is, also, actually defensive. Here’s a human example: You’re back in the same restaurant, and calmly eating your meal. As you pause between bites, your rather overly enthusiastic waiter comes to remove your plate. You’re not finished, and you remonstrate. Normally, he’d back off. Instead, he continues to take your plate. Depending on your personality, you might ask him to put the plate down, grab him, grab the plate, or even raise your voice. Some people might actually display a real temper tantrum.

We require our dogs to be civilized when we take things from them, but possession is natural – they must be taught to share with us. Generally speaking, they go through the same progression – from objection to anger – that they do when being approached uninvited. First, they cover the food (or object) – freezing over it. If that doesn’t work, they stare at the food and growl. This is telling us that the food belongs to them, and to back off. Sometimes they’ll start eating very fast. If you continue to approach, the growl grows louder, and they’ll look up at you. If you once again don’t heed the warning, they will snap, and some will bite.



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You can almost always teach a puppy to share. It can be much more difficult to teach an adult, who has a history of successful guarding behind him.

At any rate, it's obviously best if a dog doesn't bite. It's even better if we don't put them in a position where they've run out of other choices.

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