



Behavior and Training Department Behavior Resources

Common Behavior Problems

Possession

Most dogs are somewhat possessive. They — like us — want to own things, whether it's food, chew objects or toys. Some dogs like to possess inappropriate objects, such as newspapers or tissue (tissue seems especially valuable to some dogs!). Wanting to keep things is normal, defending them mildly is normal, but defending them aggressively is unacceptable, because it poses a danger to owners, their family and friends.

When the humane society acquires a dog, one of the tests the dog undergoes has to do with possession. We use a sliding scale to determine whether the dog has a problem, and how big it is. Mild possession can be worked on and eliminated, using a variety of techniques. There are times when testing does not reveal possession problems, since many dogs will not show it until they feel comfortable in a new home. Please let us know whether a dog is displaying signs of possession, so we can help modify the behavior.

- No possession — food, objects or toys can be taken from the dog with no outward sign of distress.
- Mild possession — food — dog eats more quickly (usually with tail madly wagging); toys — dog averts his head and tries to avoid your hand, perhaps carries the toy to another room or under a chair.
- Possessive — food — dog digs his face into the bowl, and pushes the bowl away from for your hand. Sometimes gives you a look — stares at you with the whites showing. Toys — dog grabs toy and won't let you have it, usually you have to force him to let it go.
- Major possession — food or toys — dog snarls and/or growls as you try to put your hand near his food or objects, snaps if your hand is too close. This dog will bite.
- Extreme possession — Dog protects food or toys within a radius of several feet. Sometimes people or other dogs can't even be in the same room with the possessive dog.

Predatory

All dogs (and cats) are predatory by their nature. If left in the wild, they would hunt and kill other animals for food. In some breeds, we have reduced the amount of predatory behavior they display, while in others, it is still very evident. The most common types of dogs that show predatory behavior are Northern breeds (like Huskies, Malamutes, Akitas), herding dogs (like Border Collies, German Shepherds, Australian heelers), terriers, and sight hounds (like Afghans, Greyhounds, Borzois). Breed type does not automatically mean those dogs are predatory, and of course a dog can be predatory that does not belong to those groups. We sometimes note, without actually seeing it ourselves, that a dog is of a breed predisposed towards predatory behavior. At its worst, a predatory dog can and will chase and kill smaller animals. This is another case where shelters can't always successfully test the behavior — some dogs have a predilection for cars or running children, which we are unable to provide.

Anxiety

Dogs are pack animals — in fact, next to food, the pack is the most important thing in a dog's life. That's why they make great companions...they *like and need* to be with us. That's also why they can be so infuriating when they're left alone — whining, barking, chewing, digging and generally being a nuisance. We call that **separation anxiety**. Some dogs also show **separating anxiety** — that is, anxious or nervous behavior during the leaving process, though they're okay once you've left.

Separation anxiety is sometimes confused with boredom or too little exercise, though it's actually pretty easy to test your dog's motivation. If the dog constantly seeks your company — following you from room to room, showing distress when she can't get to you or needing to touch you often — then separation anxiety is indicated. If the dog seems happy to be away from you when you're home, and if she shows some of the disturbing behaviors when you're only in the next room, then she's probably under-stimulated (bored!).

Some dogs show major separation anxiety — they gnaw on doors, try to get out of rooms or chew on themselves, even hurting themselves. In extreme cases, dogs have been known to jump through plate glass windows or chew through garage doors. This is a very difficult condition to spot in a kennel, since the dog is never left completely alone.



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There are many things you can do to help your dog overcome either separation anxiety or boredom. The major remedy for separation anxiety is teaching the dog to be alone for various periods of time, while controlling the environment. The remedy for boredom is making sure your dog gets at least two stimulating walks or runs a day, and is not left alone for extended periods of time.

Leash Aggression, Barrier Aggression/Fence Fighting

There's a big difference between true aggression and these behaviors. True aggression is a huge behavior problem — dogs that were not socialized in puppyhood or who have had traumatic experiences may actually attack and hurt other dogs.

Leash aggression, on the other hand, is really frustration. The dog sees another dog, tries to get to it, can't, pulls on the leash, begins to strain, gets more frustrated, starts to bark and lunge and gives all the appearance of wanting to get to and attack the other dog! That's one reason why it's so important to teach your dog not to pull on the leash (probably the most difficult exercise to teach, since leashes are not natural to a dog, and neither is being restrained against their will — just imagine a two-year-old child on a leash in a toy store and you see what we mean!). At any rate, leash aggression — left alone — can turn into real aggression.

Barrier aggression/fence fighting come from the same source — frustration. At first, the dog tries to get through the fence to whatever it is she wants to investigate. Barked, she will run up and down the fence-line, barking in frustration. In dog runs or kennels, the dog may also be bored, and use charging the fence as a form of entertainment! This can be a naturally reinforcing behavior, so yelling "no" usually doesn't do a bit of good. Dogs that have been kenneled for some time often show some barrier aggression.

Sometimes dogs use fences to enforce their territoriality and to drive "intruders" away. Think of the dog that barks at anything that goes by her fence — joggers, cars, bicycles, other dogs. As far as she's concerned, she's driving them away — she has no idea they were going anyway. A similar behavior occurs with postal carriers and delivery people — the dog barks, the intruder leaves. As far as the dog is concerned, that's cause and effect.

Both leash and barrier aggression can become very serious, as the dog practices and gets better and better. Leash aggression needs training, barrier aggression or fence fighting needs environmental controls — if you need help, please contact our Behavior & Training Department.

Territorial Aggression

Virtually all dogs have a sense of territory. The territory might be your (his) apartment, your (his) house, or the yard. This is quite natural (we have it too!), and stems from controlling enough land and resources to have enough to eat. Just as you might dislike a stranger walking into your house, and perhaps might confront him to ascertain his business, so too a dog might well confront a stranger. Of course, they do it in an entirely different way. Most of the time, they'll bark to try to warn the stranger off. If the stranger leaves, they stop barking. This constitutes a successful behavior (the dog barked, the stranger fled). Without management and training from the owner, the barking could well escalate into lunging.

Some breeds are more likely to show extreme territorial aggression than others. Northern breeds (e.g., Huskies, Samoyeds) show little territoriality. Protection dogs (e.g., Rottweilers, Doberman Pinschers, Mastiffs) can and will defend their territory very efficiently.

It's important to realize that dogs that show territorial aggression may well be sweet, gentle and compliant when off their territory. This is a NATURAL tendency; it is not aberrant behavior. However, it does have to be controlled, as it can lead to aggression.

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