The Marin Humane Society

Preventing Aggression

Dog-to-dog aggression is a pretty common problem, and spans all breeds and both sexes, though some types of aggression are more likely to be associated with males or females. Aggression normally becomes a problem in adolescence – in dogs, between the ages of seven or eight months and two and a half years

People always want to know why their dog is inappropriately aggressive towards other dogs. There are many reasons, some of which I'm sure I don't know, since I'm not a dog. Some dogs are born bad, but not very many. Most dogs learn to act aggressively. In fact, aggression is a natural behavior, necessary to keep social order in a pack. So, all dogs have the potential to be aggressive…some never use it.

Proper socialization will teach the dog when not to act aggressively. Many dogs do not get that socialization. Often owners inadvertently teach the dogs to be aggressive, by stopping proper aggressive behavior (in which the dog learns to inhibit its aggression by being disciplined by another dog).

Most aggression starts one of two ways:

1. Adolescent dogs often race towards other dogs straight on, with the intention of playing. When they get to another dog, they may body slam them, or race beside them. That's rude canine behavior, but the youngster doesn't know that. Dog #2 may defend itself by snapping or biting (after all, it's being attacked), or it may run away. If Dog #2 defends itself, Dog #1 (the adolescent) learns that other dogs are dangerous…and may decide that ALL other dogs are dangerous, and thereby modify its future behavior. If Dog #2 runs away, Dog #1 chases, which is loads of fun, and learns to bully other dogs. As the dog practices, fear and uncertainty disappear, and the behavior becomes more successful.

2. Another scenario involves shy or fearful dogs, that may well try to scare other dogs away by barking; when that doesn't work, they'll lunge, chase…and finally bite. As time goes by, they'll default to those behaviors, and get better and better at them. The better they are, the more ingrained the behavior is, the harder it is to modify. The old adage is proved – practice makes perfect.

Owners often inadvertently reinforce the behavior with their actions, by screaming or yelling, by increasing frustration as they tighten the leash, and by staying close to their dog, which the dog may see as solidarity.

It's very, very, very difficult – sometimes impossible - to cure aggressive behavior. It's much easier to prevent it. Here are some guidelines:

- The owner must first set up firm, fair rules of the house, including where the dog sleeps, eats and how much attention he or she gets.
- The dog must be taught to respect its owner, to do as the owner says, and to do it quickly.
- The dog should feel dependent upon the owner. He or she should feel mild panic if the owner disappears or moves away in a strange situation, and the dog should wish to rejoin the owner quickly.
- The leash should ALWAYS be slack. A tight leash encourages frustration, which in turn encourages aggression.
- The owner must observe all play between dogs, encourage proper play and discourage excessively rough play. When dogs play roughly, they learn to be bullies or to be afraid of other dogs. They also learn they have to rely on themselves for defense, since their owner isn't coming to their rescue. Dogs sometimes form loose packs, which should be discouraged, since they encourage bully behavior.
- The owner should encourage all play with toys and objects, especially retrieving and carrying balls or squeaky toys
- The dog should be exercised enough to be exhausted at least once a day.
- In tricky situations, the dog should be taught to default to a particular behavior, like sit.
- If at all possible, the dog should feel that it has a job to do when on a walk…carrying a ball is a good one. Finding treats on the ground is another.
- The dog must trust the owner.

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