

Understanding Aggressive Behavior in Dogs

Animals communicate. Growling, barking, baring teeth, snarling, snapping, and biting are among the handful of communication tools available to dogs. Unfortunately, these behaviors are generally unacceptable to humans. Because humans and dogs have different communication systems, misunderstandings can occur between the two species.

From the dog's perspective, there's usually a reason for the above behaviors. A person may intend to be friendly, but a dog may **perceive** that person's behavior as threatening or intimidating.

Below is some general information. Because these behaviors are complex, and because the potential consequences are serious, we recommend that you seek professional help from an animal behavior specialist if your dog is displaying concerning behavior.

Communicating out of Fear or Anxiety: This is very common and understandable. Fear and anxiety can cause a defensive reaction when a dog believes he is in danger of being harmed or has become very anxious about something. Remember that it is your dog's **perception of the situation**, not the actual intent, which determines the dog's response. For example, you may raise your arm to throw a ball, but your dog may growl, snap, or run away because he believes he is going to be hit.

Territorial Behavior: The dog responds in defense of property, and that "territory" may extend well past the boundaries of your yard. Some dogs think that their territory includes the entire block around where you live, your car, your home etc.

Protective Behavior: Usually refers to growling, barking, lunging or biting people who a dog perceives as a threat to his person or family.

Resources: It is a natural behavior for dogs to defend their food, toys, or other valued objects, including items as peculiar as tissues stolen from the trash. This can be in response to a basic and natural instinct, to having a lack of resources at some time in their life, attention seeking behavior, or inappropriate feedback from people or other dogs.

Redirected nipping or biting: If a dog is somehow provoked by a person or animal and becomes very excited and overly stimulated and is unable to get to them, he may turn and bite someone or something else. For example, two family dogs may become excited and bark and growl in response to another dog passing by the front yard and may turn and go after each other since they cannot reach the dog passing by.

There will always be differences

How dogs respond in any particular situation varies markedly from dog to dog and with the same dog, from situation to situation. Some dogs tend to bite with very little stimulation. Others may be subjected to all kinds of threatening stimuli and events and not even growl in communication.

What You Can Do

- Check with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the behavior.
- Seek professional advice. Working with behavior problems requires help from an animal behavior specialist.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep people and other animals safe. Supervise, confine, or restrict your dog's activities until you can obtain professional guidance. You are liable for your dog's behavior.
- Avoid exposing your dog to situations where he is uncomfortable. You may need to keep him confined to a safe room where he can relax.
- If your dog is possessive of toys or treats, or territorial in certain locations, prevent access and you'll prevent the problem. In an emergency, trade him for something better than what he has. For example, if he steals your shoe, trade him a piece of chicken for the shoe.

What NOT to do

Punishment often makes the problem worse. If the behavior is motivated by fear, punishment will likely make your dog more fearful and attempting to punish a dog who is already feeling threatened may actually lead him to escalate his behavior.

Instead of punishing your dog, help your dog out of a situation and calmly lead him somewhere safe where he can relax. Safely manage your dog and seek professional help.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.