

Doggone bloopers - which canine behaviours cause the most complaints and what makes dogs behave that way

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ABSTRACT

Dogs understand the world in a very different way from people. Much of dogs' behaviour is considered inappropriate by people particularly when conflict arises between the species. The major behaviour problems are aggression, especially dominance aggression, barking and the destructive behaviours of digging and chewing. Many of these inappropriate behaviours occur because of our misunderstanding of the instinctive behavioural needs of the dog in our quest for the companionship and protection they provide.

PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD

Dogs understand their world in a very different way from people. Dogs are bombarded with a vast complexity of scent from other dogs, people and their surroundings. Their ears channel an astounding array of sounds including those from high frequencies and their eyes direct tantalising images of outline and movement along the neural pathways. This rich assortment of stimulation from the dog's environment is all assessed by the brain. Based upon instincts that can be very different from our own and coupled with its experiences of life, the dog determines its response and acts in its own best interests at the time.

NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF DOGS AND PEOPLE

When people get a dog they mostly expect it to fulfil a purpose for them. Often a dog is expected to be a guard as well as a companion, or at the very least to serve as a watch dog alerting its owner to danger. People are casually aware that by virtue of its nature most dogs will bark and perhaps even bite. However owners expect their dog to behave appropriately in the many situations they place it in. Dogs have few requirements, apart from the necessities of life, but depending upon their age, breed and sex they will need some considerations for their natural behaviour. Many owners restrict their understanding to just what they expect of their dog and overlook these behavioural needs. Most of the dog's actions which are a danger or nuisance to humans are far from being abnormal behaviour. Often, given the circumstances in which it is found, dog's behaviour is completely normal and highly predictable. However where dog's behaviour is unacceptable to people we should recognise and deal with it as inappropriate behaviour.

MAJOR BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

Aggression

Aggression is the most common behaviour problem for which I am called upon for help. For convenience sake I have divided dog aggression into several main headings.

Pain induced aggression occurs when a dog is actually injured or in pain. This aggression can be quite startling to owners who see their otherwise gentle dog turn into a snarling animal when they rush to its aid. The level of 'pain induced aggression' is not only related to the amount of pain the dog is suffering but also to the situation, breed and age of the dog. Although it may seem distasteful to some it is important to advise owners to muzzle their dog when giving it first aid. In an emergency a simple muzzle can be made by placing a noose bandage over the jaws to tie them shut.

Maternal aggression - the female's instinct to protect her young can be surprisingly powerful. Most regular breeders, particularly those who breed guard dogs, are very aware of the female's potential for heightened aggression. However it is the normally passive dogs that can catch their owners unawares especially when they display otherwise uncharacteristic aggression to strangers.

Predatory aggression is where dogs display aggressive behaviour for the purpose of obtaining food. Some purists believe predatory behaviour should not be classified as aggressive as it is merely for food acquisition and not accompanied by threats. However, when we consider the consequences of dogs' predatory behaviour with other companion animals, children and the elderly, it is difficult to classify the behaviour as other than aggressive.

Dogs may show predictable predatory aggression to their traditional prey species unless they have been socialised or trained to do otherwise. In the outer suburban areas of our cities dogs are responsible for a considerable number of attacks on livestock. Contrary to popular belief these attacks are not carried out by wild or unowned domestic dogs. Instead most attacks come from dogs that have temporarily eluded the control of their owners, often without their full awareness. Large dogs may also initially show predatory behaviour to small dogs until they are identified as being of the same species. It is unusual for dogs to prey upon each other except in exceptional circumstances. None the less dogs can act in a predatory way towards babies, small children and infirm elderly people, especially if several dogs are in company and acting outside of their owner's control.

Fear based aggression is a very serious problem in domestic dogs. Often a scared dog will not choose to avoid other dogs and people but instead make a pre-emptive attack to chase away the object of their fear. The dog quickly learns that it should behave aggressively whenever it is scared.

Dominance aggression is the most common of all the behaviour problems I am called upon to treat. Dominance aggression is so common because it is an everyday part of normal dog behaviour. Over the generations evolutionary pressure in the form of natural selection has determined that it is dominant dogs that earn the right to breed. Dominance is a characteristic that has been passed on throughout the domestication of dogs. Although many physical and some behavioural characteristics have been changed by our selective breeding, the characteristic of bossiness remains largely intact in the majority of modern day dogs.

When dogs meet in the park they are not interested in discussing the finer points of poetry, they are instead overwhelmingly concerned with who is the boss. Sometimes it is immediately clear which is the dominant dog, otherwise they can be seen circling each other whilst a detailed appraisal is made. In a similar way dogs rapidly assess whether they can dominate a person. If they initially find themselves subordinate they may still try to move up through the social hierarchy until they are in control.

The fact that the dog has become the most dominant member in the owner's family may not always be obvious to the owner. However when a bossy dog is dragged out from under a chair or the hapless owner dares to otherwise upset their dominant dog an attack can occur. Usually the dog only has to mildly rebuke the recalcitrant owner by snapping or lunging at them. Owners often dismiss this out of character behaviour and say the dog was just having a bad day. However if this dominantly aggressive behaviour goes unchecked the dog soon assumes a position of supremacy. Later insurrections by the hapless owner will incur the true wrath of the dog who views the person's behaviour as totally unacceptable. The dog is then accused of being unpredictable and of making a totally unprovoked attack.

Barking

Excessive barking by dogs can be extremely annoying to people and can also be the cause or catalyst for bitter disputes between neighbours. Barking is one of the many forms of communication dogs use both within and between the species. During the many thousands of years that dogs and humans have lived together dogs' barking behaviour has provided a marvellous early warning system. It may just be coincidental but most dogs seem to have a bark which is loudest around 1kHz, a level to which the human ear is especially sensitive. Only rarely does the barking of the owner's dog cause a problem to them, rather it is the barking of other people's dogs which is considered a problem. If people do not own a dog themselves the barking of everyone else's dogs is especially annoying.

Although owners can identify up to five different kinds of barking depending on the circumstances, for convenience, we can classify nuisance barking into the two groups of 'alarm barking' and 'separation barking'. Alarm barking is usually in the form of a three component 'Wow, Wow, WOW !', whereas attention seeking barking often consists of a single component bark with longer intervals in between such as 'Wow' pause 'Wow' pause 'Wow'. Alarm barking usually has bursts of peak activity coinciding with key environmental stimulation such as the children coming home from school, whereas attention seeking barking can continue unabated for the entire duration of the owner's absence.

Destructive behaviour

Destructive behaviour by dogs can be of considerable nuisance value especially to their owners. The two major forms of destructive behaviour are digging and chewing.

Digging

Dogs dig naturally for several practical reasons: to make dens to bear their young; when they are following their prey; and for temperature control to either achieve relief from chill winds or as cooling pits during hot weather. Dogs also dig holes when they are bored or frustrated. It is likely that the fragrance released from the soil is very stimulating to the dog and the action of digging provides welcome relief from boredom.

Chewing

Although dogs spend a great deal of their time resting, when they are awake and restricted to their owners property they will engage in some activity. Being mouth centred creatures most dogs favour chewing as a pastime. If a lonely dog has access to objects that contain the scent of its owner they may well be chewed. The couch is a popular target as it releases even more of the owners scent as it is disembowelled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Graham has had a passionate interest in the behaviour of animals all his life. This fascination led him to formal studies at Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia where he completed a BSc 'majoring' in Biological Sciences followed by a Graduate Diploma of Education. Graham's early research, focused on stress related problems in dogs and their aggression towards people. He went on to complete a PhD at the School of Veterinary Studies at Murdoch University. His thesis was titled 'Nocturnal behaviour of the domestic dog *Canis familiaris*'. In 1993, in recognition of his research Graham was elected to full membership of the Australian Institute of Biology. In 1997 Graham was the first Australian to be recognised as a certified Applied Animal Behaviorist by the international body, the Animal Behavior Society.

Graham has had his research on dog behaviour published in distinguished scientific journals both nationally and internationally. He has appeared many times on TV current affairs and science shows together with talk back radio programs. Formerly Graham was the Executive Director of Continuing Veterinary Education at Murdoch University. Now Graham is the principal director of H.A.B.I.T.S. which is a referral practice 'providing solutions for difficult animal behaviour problems'. As well as consulting to individual animal owners, the legal profession and government, Graham conducts professional training seminars for veterinarians, veterinary nurses, council rangers and health care workers.