

Solving pooch problems - how we can help our pooches and their place in the community

Graham Adams

ABSTRACT

Most of the major dog behaviour problems can be overcome by education of the dog owning public via those people who are regularly called upon to give advice especially veterinarians, vet nurses, rangers and dog trainers. Aggressive behaviour in dogs can be reduced by selective breeding, early socialisation, effective assertive behaviour by owners and the imposition of restrictions and fencing. Inappropriate barking and destructive behaviours can be significantly reduced by preventing and treating the causes of the problems such as separation anxiety and hyper stimulation/boredom.

OVERCOMING MAJOR BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

It is essential that we promote a clear understanding of the requirements and natural behaviour of dogs.

Aggression

Pain induced and maternal aggression can largely be avoided by careful management. Awareness of the potential for an otherwise passive dog to suddenly become a biter is the most important strategy. When dealing with the injured dog the reluctance to use muzzles must be overcome. Strangers should be excluded from interaction with the bitch and her puppies.

Predatory 'aggression' can in some circumstances be controlled by behavioural modification for example aversion therapy. However this strategy runs the risk of the dog become fearful or even resentful of the owner. Predatory aggression is best controlled by adequate fencing and the restraint of unsupervised dogs. Dogs left outside at night must be fenced or chained to avoid the opportunity of them wandering and worrying livestock. Poultry must be prevented from gaining access to areas which dogs frequent. Often the dog does not get into the chicken coop but the hapless chickens fly out. Many people find it amusing for dogs to chase cats and they can be heard jokingly saying "get the cat!". This practice can, however, have repercussions as the dog can then escalate its predatory response towards other animals.

It is very important that we offer immense protection for our own offspring. Human babies and toddlers have the potential to be particularly vulnerable to predatory aggression from dogs; the two should never be left alone together. The potential for predatory aggression increases significantly with the number of dogs involved. The fact that the small child or elderly person is known to the dog(s) seems to offer little or no protection. Dogs must not be allowed to jump up, chase after, or lick (taste) humans at risk. We can not expect our dogs to show remorse because they are carrying out a natural behaviour. However we must make sure that we secure our dogs to prevent this highly inappropriate behaviour occurring.

Fear based aggression in dogs can be significantly reduced by preventative action. Although many dogs are naturally shy, only a few start their lives being truly fearful. Breeders who produce dogs that are genetically fearful have a duty to the breed and society at large not to encourage that particular line, even if the physical characteristics are attractive. To avoid dogs developing fear based aggression we should also encourage the setting up and patronage of professional puppy classes. The first 12 weeks of a puppy's life are critical to its later development. If puppies are allowed to interact with other dogs, and people other than just their owners, the likelihood of them developing fear based aggression is significantly reduced.

In addition to early socialisation we should encourage the young dog to meet visitors at our houses in a variety of friendly situations. The meetings should not take place at the front door which may be very stressful. Instead the puppy should be kept away during the initial greetings either by being placed outside or in another room. Then the puppy should be allowed to go over and greet the visitor and rewarded with praise for its friendly behaviour. It is essential that the dog should never be rewarded by comforting if it behaves in a fearful or aggressive manner.

Dominance aggression is very normal behaviour and it serves an important social function between dogs. However dominance aggression towards people can be very dangerous. Like predatory and fear based aggression, dominance aggression is readily prevented from occurring by good management. The dog should never be allowed to become too bossy especially towards its owner and immediate family. Treatment of dominance aggression is best carried out by professional Applied Animal Behaviorists and specialist veterinarians because misunderstanding of the procedure can result in injury to the owner and the demise of the dog by forced euthanasia. In general terms to resolve this problem it is important to firstly recognise the signs and then change the interactions the dog has with its owner and others around it. It is essential that the dominantly aggressive dog be treated in a non confrontational manner yet the pressure of controlled assertiveness must be applied. The dog has to recognise exactly what it can do and know that if it overstep the boundaries of acceptable behaviour it will be punished by exclusion.

Barking

As 'inappropriate barking' is generally caused either by separation anxiety or by the combination of hyper stimulation and boredom, it is necessary to treat these causes of the problem rather than merely the symptoms. We should be extremely cautious about the use of strong aversion therapy against dogs that bark. Recommending the use of gadgets such as anti barking collars and allowing the practice of yelling magic words can lead to a double jeopardy situation. Not only is the welfare of the dog compromised, but also the cause of the barking is not truly addressed so the owner, the dog and the neighbours are again distressed when the problem re-curs.

Separation anxiety barking is best treated by facilitating an understanding in the owner of the needs and requirements of their dog, especially when it is left alone. Simply stated the owner should be encouraged to reduce their contact prior to their departure and upon their return. The owner should also be encouraged to review the physical placement of their dog. If the dog is always in the house when the owners are at home and rarely experiences being outside it is not surprising that it barks when abandoned to the back yard.

Boredom/hyper stimulation barking is a problem that is best managed by removing or reducing the impact of the stimulation and increasing other appropriate activities for the dog. If the dog is not destructive the barking problem may simply be overcome by placing the dog in a part of the house. Although the dog can still hear the sounds it usually chooses not to respond. Probably the lack of response is because the dog feels it is off duty when it is inside the house. Instinctively dogs like to chase away intruders going past their territory but when they are fenced this activity is severely restricted. Upon seeing the territorial intruders the dog left outside behind a fence will attempt to chase and then bark in frustration. For this reason it is best to screen off the activities of the street and thereby reduce the stimulation for the dog to bark. Open pickets should be filled in and the dog restricted from access to any lookouts. The dog must be provided with meaningful stimulation other than the activities of the neighbour. A dog that is well exercised prior to being left for the day, then fed and provided with meaningful toys and activities, should be happy to rest without barking provided it is not over stimulated.

Destructive behaviour

Digging

The effective ways of controlling unwanted digging are to firstly provide the dog with sufficient exercise and other stimulation and secondly to protect areas of special owner importance by clearly marking them and restricting the dogs access to them. 'Inappropriate digging' has many similarities to graffiti. Yelling, screaming and punishing the perpetrator after the event is very ineffective. Of course catching the dog in the act is extremely effective, but very rare. Care should also be taken not to provoke pain induced aggression if the perpetrator is caught. Dogs will always look guilty if you are angry with them regardless of what they have done. You can point at an imaginary hole in a piece of solid concrete and the dog will look guilty. Heavy duty wire grids can be used as a temporary protection over new lawns and flower beds until they are established or regrown.

Chewing

Inappropriate chewing is best prevented by supplying the dog with plenty of suitable items dedicated for their use. Big raw bones, given regularly, can provide the dog with countless hours of enjoyment. Other suitable chewing material can include custom made dog toys such as the Kong. Having provided a vast array of suitable chewing materials the owners should be encouraged to deny the dog access to people's possessions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Graham J. Adams BSc, GradDipEd, PhD, MAIBiol, Appl Anml Behav.

H.A.B.I.T.S. Pty Ltd

1 Olding Street

MELVILLE WA 6156

Ph: (08) 9330 5096

Fx: (08) 9330 8275

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.

[UAM 1997 Index page](#)