

# Aggression in dogs—whys and wherefores

Dr Kersti Seksel

Aggression is defined as a threat, challenge or attack that is directed towards one or more individuals and it may be passive or active. It can be intra or interspecific. It may be normal or abnormal depending on the context. Most intra specific aggression is highly ritualised, appears to serve some ethologically significant function and is commonly associated with competition between members of the same social group. Interspecific aggression, however, is most commonly associated with protection of the self but may also involve some competition depending on the context.

Aggression is a non specific sign so it may be both a description and a diagnosis. Signs may be visual (changes in body posture, piloerection) and auditory (growling, barking) and may involve use of teeth and occasionally claws.

From several studies it would appear that socially mature, intact males are most often implicated in exhibiting aggressive behaviour. However, aggression is not restricted to males and there is considerable variation in time of onset of aggression with even puppies capable of serious aggression.

In any discussion of aggressive behaviour there are several aspects that need to be considered. These include not only the behaviour of the dog but also the behaviour of victim as well as the context in which the behaviour occurs.

Aggressive behaviour may be offensive or defensive in character. The sort of aggression that is exhibited at a particular time will be influenced by such factors as the dog's motivation as well as the presence of stimuli that may trigger the behaviour, as well as the presence or absence of others and the location. Experimentally it appears that each type of aggression has a clearly differentiated neurobiological basis. Several forms of aggression have been recognised in dogs. Some of these include:

- Territorial aggression: The dog protects the property by barking, growling, snarling, biting
- Predatory aggression: The dog silently stalks small animals, birds. It may also stalk infants and drooling is a common sign.
- Fear aggression: The dog may bark, growl, snarl while backing up in a response to people, or other animals. The dog shows fearful body posture, with its tail and ears down. The dog may bite from behind and run away. It looks for escape routes when cornered.
- Pain aggression: Usually in response to being manipulated or an aversive event.

All behaviour is dependent on the influences of inheritance, learning and the environment.

Although much is made of breed characteristics, there is little scientific data that corroborates it. Although some breeds may have been selected for aggressive behaviour, this does not mean that the breed is aggressive, there is just a predisposition to behave in a certain way. Additionally, each individual in that breed would not necessarily exhibit aggressive tendencies. There is also much variation within the individual, irrespective of breed. Hence, assertions such as all Dobermans, for instance, are aggressive, are untrue.

To understand why some dogs may act aggressively, it helps to view the surroundings and circumstances from the dog's perspective. That is, try to "Walk in their paws!" Regardless, most aggression can be successfully managed.

## **PREDISPOSING FACTORS:**

### **Genetic:**

- Fear or anxiety (flight, fight or freeze response)
- Temperament
- Hormones – maternal
- Neurological factors

### **Learning and previous experience:**

- Training
- Lack of socialisation
- Pain
- Fear
- Inappropriate reassurance - accidental
- Deliberate reward
- Redirected

### **Environment:**

- Presence or absence of others
- Fear provoking stimuli
- Odours, noises
- Loud voices, shouting
- Sudden movements
- Assertive manner, staring
- Inappropriate reassurance
- Confinement or tying

### **Possible solutions:**

#### **Genetic:**

- Early advice re pet selection
- Breeding for temperament
- Neutering

**Learning and previous experience:**

- Explain how not to inadvertently reassure unacceptable behaviour
- Reward appropriate behaviour ONLY
- Socialisation – eg Puppy Preschool®, obedience training
- Pain reduction
- Desensitisation, habituation

**Environment:**

- NEVER USE AGGRESSION
- Assess context
- Ignore the dog
- Never make direct eye contact
- Watch body language, approach from the side not from front or behind
- Offer treats
- Speak softly, calmly
- Allow time

**REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING:**

- Beaver, B. et al (2001). A community approach to dog bite prevention. Report of the AVMA Task force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interaction, JAVMA, 218, (11) 1732-1749
- Houpt, K. A. (1991). Domestic animal behavior (2nd ed). Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.
- Landsberg, G., Hunthausen, W. & Ackerman, L. (1997). Handbook of behaviour problems of the dog and cat. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Lindsay, S. R. (2001) Applied Dog Behavior and Training. Volume 2. Iowa State Press, Ames.
- Miczek, K.A. & Olivier, B. (1997) Neurochemical bases of Aggression. In Dodman, N. H. & Shuster, L (eds) Psychopharmacology of Animal Behavior Disorders. Blackwell Science, Malden MA. 17-40.
- Overall, K. L. (1997). Clinical behavioral medicine for small animals. St Louis, Missouri: Mosby.
- Serpell, J. & Jagoe, J. A. (1995). Early experience and the development of behaviour. In J. Serpell (Ed.). The Domestic Dog. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press.
- Voith, V.L. & Borchelt (1996). Readings in companion animal behavior. Trenton, New Jersey: Veterinary Learning Systems.
- Wright, J. C. (1991). Canine aggression towards people. Bite scenarios and prevention. Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice. Philadelphia, W. B. Saunders, 21: 299- 314.