

A systematic approach to Dangerous Dog assessments

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We have been actively involved in the training of police and security dogs and their handlers for over 20 years. During this time, we have observed that many dangerous dog incidents follow regular patterns of development, from the first indicators of a minor problem through to the final incident that causes the dog to come to the attention of authorities or forces the owners to take action to ensure no further incidents.

We have seen many people assess dogs that have been regarded as / or deemed dangerous, and often we have noted almost all test situations have not covered successfully many of the vital points that can be directly related to dangerous dog situations. Often people who carry out these tests are very limited in their experience and understanding of physically working dogs in any form to gauge their natural drives and instincts, or in the creation of defensive or protective situations. Regularly people whom are regarded as experts in dogs have expertise in only training for obedience or traditional sporting dog trials such as agility and flyball. Some may come from a veterinary background, where their experience has been gained from dealing with the occasional client's dog with aggressive behaviour or theoretical experience rather than physical hands on experience.

When we start to consider a systematic approach to dangerous dog assessments, there are several vital categories that must be tested, regardless of location and situation, to ensure we are really covering the possibilities of what could have truly triggered the situation. To ensure the systematic approach is flexible, we have to take into account that every dog and situation is individual and that every incident will have its own individual mechanisms or flow of events to the final dangerous dog incident. So whilst we may test all of these same categories, they might be slightly modified to cover safety and location pressures. We could also opt to test certain sections in different sequences to ensure we make the procedure as consistent as possible so that the lay person can then look at other tests to compare across the board to get a greater understanding and have a benchmark to work from.

We have to be constantly aware that sometimes a dog may appear perfectly normal, non aggressive or assertive, however given the right trigger or stimulus can instantly elevate into a very dangerous or even life threatening situation. Sometimes it is evident that no stimulation or triggers are necessary to instantly identify that a dog could be dangerous. After studying many different temperament testing styles and protocols, and observing all of the big canine groups standards of explaining temperaments and characteristics of breeds, it is obvious that this area is not well understood and is very subjective. We have chosen to use Davis' (1990) descriptions and views on temperament and character as the most workable and precise way of being able to reliably replicate this diverse area.

Davis describes dogs as either possessing a sound temperament with no incorrect categories or the dog is unsound in temperament and will possess one or more of six unsound categories. Within these six unsound categories of temperament Davis describes how they will present themselves to the trained observer. Davis' temperament analysis program takes extensive time and tutoring to learn, and the practical application on hundreds or even thousands of dogs to master. However, it is by far our most favoured system and the easiest to read and replicate reliably across the canine world.

There are many other sections that go with this temperament analysis and persons who are well versed in this program can reliably distinguish most environmental effects from genetically inherited traits.

A vital part of the systematic approach is to identify the levels of the four main natural drives and instincts which the domestic canine has inherited from the original host species *canis lupus* – the wolf. The first of these natural drives and instincts is the prey drive – the desire to chase. The second is the predatory instinct, the bite, fight, shake and kill. The third is to elevate and protect the dead prey via lying over it or near it. We identify this as guarding. The last of the four main instincts we need to test for is the defensive drive which is to aggressively guard and possess via threat or physical attack to ensure possession and to control an area which we class as a zone around the guarded object, person or location. These natural drives and instincts may not present themselves in some domestic dogs but in others can be extremely apparent hence if a assessment tool does not identify or cover these and take into account the levels and the intensities of each instinct or drives display, it is probably missing one of the most vital and critical points of dangerous dog assessment. Another of the vital points that we have to assess, identify and categorise is the given character of the individual animal. This means how tough and how capable the animal is to carry out its threat or to deal with stress and even its ability to withstand physical pressure, as in a heightened stimulus incident these points will become very important to the outcome and severity of an incident or attack. We also use the categorisation tool of soft, moderate and hard character for ease of understanding by persons whom are not versed in this temperament analysis process.

Throughout these tests we are constantly observing the dog's reaction via displayed stress levels or behaviours so that we can endeavour to identify if the dog is:

- displaying natural or what we call genetically inherited levels and displays; or
- if they have been unduly built via poor and incorrect handling from either anthropomorphic or extremely soft and inconsistent handling and management from its owners.

The latter will be evident if the dog at first displays high levels of aggression and threat displays but then is easily backed down and stabilised by the assessor putting psychological pressure via movements, postures and breaching the dog's zones of reaction. A dog that looks extreme in its first reactions but very easily stresses and backs down without any of the six unsound categories being displayed has either been environmentally enhanced incorrectly to this point or is lacking correct social exposure. Both of these points are good to identify as this will give you the true level of threat that has been inherited from ancestry - a dog can be environmentally enhanced but once it is taken over its true genetic stress threshold it can only function at its true genetic level.

Many so called dangerous or aggressive dogs are incorrectly environmentally enhanced from poor handling and management via well intentioned people whom either anthropomorphise or are extremely soft and unduly rewarding.

This gives the dog the impression of having a higher position in the pack than it's true genetic abilities, causing a massive increase in dog problems and directly increasing incidents of threat and aggression and even attack.

We have incorporated in our systematic approach to assessment, the rehearsals of prey, predatory, guarding, defence from a training and rehearsed standpoint. From the training side, we test each individual assessment case on a range of training equipment and methods such as a hessian sack and tug of war which can be the beginning point of training puppies or adult dogs in bite or defensive work. We also test to see if they recognise equipment such as bite sleeves or suits and techniques used by unnatural or defensive training such as putting the dog into fight or flight situations where it can not make flight so we see the rehearsed reaction.

This is necessary as the greater majority of trainers whom train guarding type dogs unfortunately still train in outdated or the defensive manner which can often produce the equivalent to a classic fear biter with some control, but leaves the dog with a defensive attitude that is not conducive with being a great ambassador for working dogs in society. We also test for a popular defensive trained technique known as flanking, which we can test without having to cause any physical touching via just rehearsing the patterns leading up to the actual physical flank situation. We have to be aware that any dog that has had prior training will understand certain movements and patterns that trainers would utilise to bring out natural abilities or even unnatural aggression so these have to be tested for. We also take into account that some people within the community find it acceptable to have their dogs fight with other dogs or harass and aggress other animals, so we test by using props such as toys that represent small fluffy animals and other props such as rope toys and rags to see if the dogs have been acquainted to this type of play from owners or handlers. Many owners engage in this activity without realising the consequence of building natural drives and instincts hence heightening the chance of the dog rehearsing and causing a dangerous dog situation or incident. We also test throughout the process to ensure that the dog is not displaying common play behaviours that are not going to present as a big problem to their ability to fit into society and the community.

Naturally throughout this process we have to take into account that every dog and situation is individual and that the location where we carry out the test is not always going to be the optimum for testing and especially for safety. It is up to the tester to ensure the safety of themselves, staff, bystanders and other animals present and the most significant factor in this assessment is always to maintain safety at all times. The very nature of testing does cause us to have to place ourselves in situations and proximity that does increase our risk remarkably, but there are several safety props such as shields and full body bite suits that we can utilise to enhance safety, whilst ensuring our systematic assessment procedures are still covered. We have to also take into account that this systematic approach will not be able to account for the dog being on its familiar ground which could enhance its level of display due to its familiarity and heightened levels of protection, guarding and possession. Whenever possible we test all dogs in unfamiliar surroundings with unfamiliar people so we get a more constant ability to read dogs whilst they are under pressure. We feel this gives us a much more stable testing protocol that is more able to be reliably replicated and allows us to manage as many variables throughout the process.

These are just a few of the most significant points of a systematic approach to dangerous dog assessments. Naturally there are many other points and situations that are necessary to ensure a good correct and unbiased assessment.

References

Davis, W. (1990) Professional Dog Training. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company

About the Author

Craig Murray, Master Training Instructor. 1991 saw Craig live in the USA whilst receiving his Professional Dog Trainer's Diploma (600hrs) approved by the U.S. Senate for Education and the West Virginia Dept of Education.

He was also employed on a police and narcotic dog program within the U.S.A. Craig has been instructing for over 10 years at the Qld. University Veterinary Science School as a permanent part-time instructor. He has been involved in bringing several world authorities to Australia to build his education in all facets of dog training. Craig has trained police and narcotic dogs overseas and has sold mantrailing bloodhounds to overseas police and prisons departments. He trained Australia's first operationally proven cadaver recovery dog and gained international recognition for his involvement in the 'Backpacker' Murders Investigation and has been employed by five states police depts for his specialist dogs and skills. Craig also trained the world's first ambergriss dog and three world first sniffer dogs for the Government including the Fire Ant Detection Dog, and the world acclaimed Chemical Residue Detection Dog. He is currently also training Assurances and Service Dogs - training and supplying dogs to help physically and mentally disabled persons. He is also working with specialist Doctors to develop a seizure response dog training program. 1994 saw Craig back in the USA to receive an International Award for dog training excellence in law enforcement and his master trainer instructor's diploma. He has also run courses overseas to train specialist odour detection dog trainers. He has been travelling to Japan for the previous 7 years teaching throughout colleges in four major cities. He currently provides training workshops for the Animal Industries Resource Centre Certificate IV Animal Control and Regulation, Identify and Respond to Animal Behaviour Unit of Competency. Craig encourages clients to check all his references and has a long-term motto "TALK IS CHEAP!" so a live demonstration of his dogs working will do his talking.