

AVOIDING AGGRESSION IN PUPPIES

by Martin Deeley

It is estimated that over four million people in America get bitten by dogs each year. I would venture that of those, the highest percentage are not only known to the dog, but are also either members of their 'family', neighbors or close friends.

Nearly ***fifty percent of these victims are usually children under the age of 10***, with girls generally being bitten around the face area and boys around the legs. I would think that this is due to girls wanting to cuddle the dog like a baby doll and boys either running around the dog or even giving the occasional kick.

There is no doubt that any dog can bite, it is part of their make-up, a way to discipline each other and communicate. Dogs often do with their mouths what we do with our hands - carry, hold, control, shake, greet. As owners we have to make them aware that biting humans is unacceptable unless it is part of their 'work' and therefore under control. With this in mind I would caution owners who are wanting guard or attack dogs for protection. Encouraging your dog to physically guard your house is analogous to having a loaded gun on the kitchen counter. In most events it is not an unwanted person that is hurt, it is again the family. An alert, barking dog is one of the best deterrents to unwanted visitors that anyone could have. Intruders think twice when they hear a dog barking. Firstly, the noise alerts people and secondly they are unsure of the nature of the dog's temperament. So a retreat is usually the most prudent action.

Aggression can take many different forms. It can be inherited through the genes, influenced by the environment or the dog's natural instincts such as a border collie chasing (herding) moving objects, or learned for example - when a pup learns to back the rest of the litter off the food bowl by a growl or heavy shoulder. This learning can transfer to backing its human pack off when it feels the need.

Very few dogs are outright aggressive, most show it by a look, a body posture or paw placed in the right place. But generally we think of aggression when we see strong posturing (hackles raised, ears laid back, stiff legs), growling, barking and lip curling. All of these behaviors can be prompted for both defensive or offensive reasons. In my experience of owning boarding kennels and having thousands of dogs through my hands, more bites are as a result of defense mechanisms than attack. With today's dog breeding there appears to be an increase in characteristic sensitivity resulting in nervousness and fears. When a dog feels threatened it retreats and then turns to defend itself. If caught in a corner it will certainly defend itself. Add to that a situation where the dog sees its retreat to an area of security cut off, and you have a potentially dangerous situation. 'Like a Rat in a trap'.

Not too long ago my partner and I were called to a home where the dog had bitten, albeit only slightly, the small daughter. "It came from out of no-where" we were informed. When we got there the dog appeared to be a happy easy going female who not only played with the three children in the family but relished being chased, pulled about and teased. This bite didn't appear to make sense until we managed to get the 8 year old daughter, who had been bitten, to explain exactly what had happened. We asked that the mother did not speak for her, prompt or interject. The dog had been on a sofa at the end of a narrow hallway, where she was not allowed to be, and had been punished previously for doing this. The young daughter saw the dog there from the hallway door and sternly told her to get off. The dog did as it was told but as she ran past the girl to get to her crate, the little girl reached out and smacked her. In fear the dog had quickly taken a snap. Unfortunately the moving teeth and the little girl's hand, which reacted by pulling away from the snap, made contact. An accident? Maliciousness? Lack of common sense? You call it what you will but many dogs get euthanized because of an incident just like this. Kids imitate adults, and

you have to wonder *where* did this child even get the idea she was allowed to discipline the family dog.

Dogs are pack animals and are **dogs** - not miniature humans with four legs and a fur coat, which so many of us and our families try to make them into. **Neither** are they animated 'toys' for the children. Our family is their pack but **they don't expect equality** with the family 'pack' members. Dogs don't think that way. What they want to know is how they fit into the family 'pack', where they are in the pecking order (who's the Boss) and they need to have confidence in what they can and cannot do. Consistency among the family members and familiarity with regular routines helps this. Before you misjudge me, let me say that I love all my dogs, they are my best friends, I miss them when I have to be parted from them and I even have one that sleeps on the pillow with me. But **they think, act, and react differently from us.**

Let's separate this a little further. Unlike us, dogs do not study human behavior in depth and make decisions on what they find. In fact, in my opinion, I think they see us as upright walking dogs. Therefore let us look at life through the dog's eye. If another dog tries to lay on you, kick you, hold you tight against your wishes, what do you do to tell the other dog you don't like what they are doing or request that it give up. If you are a dog which doesn't want to fight, you will lie motionless and show subservience, maybe even lay on your back and show your tummy. But what if you are not subservient or the other dog frightens you. You are more likely to growl, fight back and ultimately bite. With most pet dogs the growl is a warning, biting is a last 'stab' effort to communicate. But what if that other dog now fights back? You fight even harder and bite harder. And the fight only stops when one of you submits and shows subservience. Now let's slightly change that scenario. A dog is intimidated in some way by a child, growls but gets no response and resorts to a 'snap or bite to discipline the child. The child becomes frightened, screams, yells, maybe even hits out and kicks (this would be considered fighting back in the dog's mind). Based on what we understood would happen between two dogs, what is the natural instinct of the dog in this instance? To fight until the other dog, in this case the child, submits, which because of its own natural instincts and now pain, it cannot do in a way that the dog recognizes. The dog will therefore continue to bite and usually with more intensity, trying for the submission.

Now, think hard, and put yourself in the dog's shoes. When does wrestling, hugging, rolling around on the floor, and chasing which has been fun suddenly become unpleasant and demand a warning communication. Yes, you're right every dog is different, as is every play situation. How good are you at reading the dog and when that moment occurs? If you ever get the warning, - a growl or just 'the look', you have gone too far.

My own experience is that there are very few naturally aggressive dogs who attack simply because it is in their make up. They are triggered by some past experience, action, approach or environment. Even wearing a baseball cap triggered one boarder of mine into such fear that he became aggressive. If I took my baseball cap off before going into his kennel and walking him, he was no problem. Experience meant that a baseball cap spelled 'Danger' and potential pain. I have had only a handful of dogs (out of thousands) that showed aggression over any of their property or food. Of the hundreds I have *personally* owned and trained for clients from pups, none showed aggressive possessiveness.

The most common forms of aggression are learned dominance aggression (bullying), 'fear' aggression and aggression as a result of their natural characteristics which have not been channeled and controlled. Terriers love to shake (and kill), cattle and sheep dogs (including the little Corgi) love to nip at ankles and herd, gundogs love to hold objects in their mouth and hunt for game, hounds live for the chase and pull down game (and also kill), the working breeds such as German Shepherd, Doberman and Rottweiler are often a mixture of guarding and herding, with territorial and pack protection at the top of their priorities. Every breed, even the toy breeds, have a potential to bite and to show aggression. Because they do not usually do as much damage as the larger breeds, toys get very little publicity. But whatever the breed, as responsible owners we need to recognize all the potential and possible problems and take the necessary

steps to prevent, minimize or eliminate any occurrences. ***Too often we 'stick our heads in the sand' - "Our 'pooch' would never do that!"***

I don't intend in this article to tell you how to overcome established aggression because I do feel that each case is unique to every dog and its environment and requires a skilled professional to evaluate the situation, the reasons the problem occurred, and methods to reduce or control it. If you have a dog with an aggression problem what I would suggest is that you evaluate the way you relate and interact with your dog from the moment you brought it into your family. Have you treated it as a human? Or as a dog? Are you consistent and communicate with the dog on it's level? If you have a young dog, think 'dog' and work at *prevention* rather than have to cure a problem later.

I can't ever remember in 23 years ever seeing an incidence of dog fighting or aggression against a person at gundog field trials, Obedience Competitions, Agility or many other events where the dogs have been **trained** to do a job. Even police dogs only show aggression when commanded to do so and for them it is part of their job. In fact I have a very good friend who trains Police dogs for the prison service and he told me emphatically that he **did not** want an aggressive dog. He wanted a dog with a balanced temperament who saw the work we think of as aggression as being 'play'. He taught the dogs to attack in a way that was play, and their mind was in 'play' mode. He emphasized this fact by adding that "**A truly aggressive dog is difficult to 'switch off' once it has attacked, I need to be able to stop and start the controlled 'aggression' at any time.**" If you watch a display of police dogs, the body posture and tail action of the best dogs shows pleasure not true animal aggression. It is all in the training. And therein lies the clue. I really believe that dogs want to fit into the family pack and be regarded as an active member with acceptable social graces and manners. That means your dog enjoys being taught what is acceptable and not acceptable. It wants to know it's boundaries and limits. It has to have confidence in your behavior and its environment and have routines it can trust. As I have said earlier it does not expect equality and it will come to accept what you give, provided it is **fair and humane**. Your training starts the moment you get your pup, it is learning from everything you do. I like to be fairly consistent with my feeding routines but I dictate when the food goes down on the floor not my dog. When I have a pup I will often hold the bowl for the dog to eat, occasionally taking it away for a second or two while it is feeding before returning it.

Toys and bones I hold for the pup to take but I teach them also to let go, ('Drop'). They are **my** 'toys' which I allow them to use, chew and play with. Pups just send me crazy, I love the smell and feel of them so I do spend quite a bit of time holding them and 'pretending' to check them over. I sit on the floor, cradle the pup in my lap, massage the skin around the neck and shoulders, pick up the paws individually and look between the nails, check the teeth, and around the tail area. I let the pup get used to being handled, and learn to understand that hands are friendly not threatening.

Basic companion obedience training in the home and everyday environments is always a positive way to develop a pleasing dog. I work at and encourage a pup to be calm while being stroked, having the leash put on for a walk, greeting people, getting its dinner. Get the pup to 'work' for you and everyone in the family. ***'Everyone in the family' is important*** because a dog will learn who it can behave in certain ways with and who it cannot. It is unfair to both you and your pup if you are working to create this great dog partnership and the rest of your family are sabotaging it by not cooperating and providing consistency. It is especially unfair to your dog who will become confused and uncertain. Floor wrestling, tug of War, chasing and smacking are all ways in which a dog can be taught that aggression is acceptable and learn ways to escape from someone who in their eyes is aggressive (Remember, like people, every dog has its own pain and tolerance threshold). So to be sure - don't do them.

Fear induced aggression can be reduced and even avoided through effective socialization. However ***one loss of temper, and fear aggression can be implanted as quickly as an arrow and very difficult to erase.*** I should add here, in case you never lose yours, a newspaper swat, using the crate for punishment, grabbing at the collar or just the dog in the wrong way or at the

wrong time can create just as many problems as a loss of temper. It always amazes me how one wrong action can have implications throughout a dogs life but it takes a lot of correct actions, timing and praise to get a dog to learn what you really want it to.

Inherited fear is difficult to eradicate (therefore careful selection of breed and lines is essential), but in most instances we owners reinforce fears without thinking. Petting and reassuring a dog showing fear can reinforce the fear by letting the dog think we like the reaction. Better to laugh and ignore any of this form of behavior (Shivering, trembling, whining) associated with nervousness and fear. Where the dog shows any nervousness of a situation do not reward in any way. ***Food and touch as a reward should only be given when the dog shows no sign of nervousness. Punishment should never be used in an attempt to correct a nervous dog.*** However this is often a natural reaction from a human. The "Don't be stupid, there's nothing to be frightened of." approach said with anger, and even a smack because you are frustrated with the dogs actions, is a sure way to get bit or just make matters worse.

Training for an obedient companion, familiarization with everyday objects, gentle effective ways of overcoming environmental factors and situations that create aggressive behaviors are all ways of reducing the potential for aggression. Dogs bite, there is no escaping that fact, but then so do humans. It is in our 'hands' to ensure that our dogs do not bite other people and other animals. Remember **the main cause of dog bites is people.**

And remember your **veterinarian** and *Florida School for Dogs* are always there as your **first source of professional advice**

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