

AGGRESSIVE OR NOT...

BEHAVIOR PROBLEM OR NOT!!!

This article is not intended as a 'cure'. Rather it is to help explain how dogs come into rescue or wind up in shelters with their owner's description/perceptions and the dog barely resembles the dog that has been described or shows no indication of the behaviors that cause the dog to be turned into rescue or into a shelter.

I must state one of my most vehement 'mantras'. The term aggressive/aggression should be BANNED from dog vocabulary. More often than not, the term is misused, misapplied, and misunderstood. Yet, when applied to our dogs...the moniker can do a tremendous disservice. A good analogy is the common practice of inappropriately interchanging the terms eager and anxious. I would love to see the term aggression/aggressive allowed to be used ONLY with careful supervision! The term is a too convenient term and is often used by laypersons and some professional behaviorists incorrectly and inaccurately. The more correct and accurate term is assertive (and occasionally, over assertive).

Now, for the crux of the article...

How can a 3-8 month old puppy be termed aggressive or vicious? How can a dog that has no history of behavior issues... suddenly, develop such dramatic behavior issues as to make it impossible for the family to keep them? How/why does a 3-8 year old 'non-biter'...become a 'biter' that must find another home or be 'put down'?

Ask yourself how/why these same dogs come into rescue or into a shelter and DO NOT exhibit the behaviors described by the owners when relinquished to a shelter or to rescue? The answers are simple. When I say simple, I mean the most basic aspects of the answers are simple. The actual, specific reasons/catalysts are NOT simple. The answers in their most elemental form are: changes in their environment, changes in the household dynamics (additions/deletions of another pack member...canine or human), pattern changes (e.g. work schedule), loss of a person or other dog, health issues/pain, unprepared/uneducated owners, all too common 'disposable dog' syndrome, and others...too numerous to list.

The more complete answers are far more complex. Understand that a 'puppy' cannot be aggressive...unless there is a physical anomaly involved. A wonderful, loving dog does not just become aggressive. Puppies do not have the capacity to be aggressive. They may be assertive, but even puppy assertiveness is harmless...UNLESS the assertiveness is allowed to continue unchecked/untrained into adulthood. Older dogs do not just become aggressive without a catalyst. So when you hear anyone apply the term aggressive to any dog, proceed with an open mind. Look to the reality. Look to the dynamics of the living situation and to other factors/ perceptions that may be the catalysts for the situation and the dog you find yourself facing.

Even 'feral' dogs are not aggressive, unless they are fighting for survival or protecting their home. Generally, they will steer clear of you or even bolt away from you. However,

if they have been abused or taunted...they may perceive all humans as 'threats' to their survival. This is a conditioned response...not just innately in the dog.

The same is true of family dogs. Unless there is a medical reason, a dog's sudden disposition to unacceptable behavior is trained/conditioned into them or it is reactive. Their trained/conditioned responses may have been brought about by inadvertent circumstances or deliberate. The reactive responses are due to what they know and understand as the 'rules' that suddenly change and they no longer understand the rules. This creates confusion...and confusion is a terrible state for any dog. They are so trusting and caring...they expect that we will be likewise by them.

All puppies are naturally 'mouthy'. (Terriers lead the pack in this area!) Initially, their mouth is their only means of communication and play. They learn this from their littermates and their canine mom. Also, they learn their basic 'bite inhibition' from their littermates and their canine mom. Initially, this canine world is their only basis for communicating. It is up to us to 'translate' what they learned in their canine world into the human environment/pack they find themselves in.

By the way, one of the best ways to translate the 'bite inhibition' to the human pack situation is to 'yelp'...make some sound that indicates 'pain' anytime the puppy or dog puts their mouth on you...even in play situations. Please note that puppies normally learn 'bite inhibition' from the 6th through the 8th week. If they are removed from their littermates and/or their mom prior to this time...they will have to learn their 'bite inhibition' TOTALLY from you. This is opposed to them understanding 'bite inhibition' and just needing to 'translate' that behavior to their new pack.

They are so trusting and exceedingly 'fair minded'! They learn fast and they love 'to please'...unfortunately, people change the rules without RETRAINING/TEACHING the dog the new rules. Let's look at different scenarios:

A home with just a mom OR dad...then, a new person enters the picture. Suddenly, there is less time and specialness...the dog's entire world has been turned upside down. It is not uncommon to have a dog (much as a child would) ACT OUT. They are trying to communicate...tell you what is distressing them. But, we don't hear.

The new person really does not like dogs....so the new rules are inevitably NO TOLERANCE. This means most of what had made up this dog's life has been removed/changed. This is utter desolation for the dog. The foundation that had defined their life, dictated their behavior, and provided their basic stability NO longer exists.

The dog reacts to the new person in their life with some (often, well deserved) trepidation. There may be...the getting in between, the growling...protecting what belongs to me, etc. Initially, this is considered cute. There is laughing and even encouraging the behavior. Remember, the dogs do want to please....so, they accommodate. They escalate the protective behavior....need I say more?

Another aspect that brings about behaviors that are unacceptable is training that is actually counter training. This means training the very behavior(s) you want to avoid. If you video taped many home play sessions, you would find the play sessions elicit and

reinforce the very behaviors that are unacceptable in ANY other family situation. An example is playing tug of war. This is a neat game....but, tugging the dog from side to side is feeding into their natural 'kill' instinct. Don't overreact here...what I mean is watch a dog kill a critter or a toy..they shake their head side to side...this is their natural instincts. We play tug and move the toy back and forth...side to side....the same motion as the innate kill actions. If you play tug...go in a circle, forward/ back up/down...just NOT side to side.

In these play sessions...we get in their face, we growl, we shove, we push...all in the name of play. How would YOU react if these same actions were done to you?? You are reinforcing unacceptable behaviors that will not be tolerated in any other situation. Now consider how this probably is perceived by the dogs. When Mom or Dad is on the floor playing with me and we are having great fun together, these behaviors make Mom or Dad happy. Hmmmm, when they are not involved with me and playing...SOMETHING makes them NOT happy. Well, it could NOT possibly be the things that make them so happy when we play together. Maybe if I keep doing these things that make them sooo happy when we play....just maybe, they will play with me and they/we will be happy, again.

So the dogs keep doing the behaviors that not only have been acceptable..but elicited from Mom and Dad and are great fun and make them sooo happy. Confusion, confusion, confusion. Don't get me wrong, these unacceptable behaviors will occur with various catalysts...but, certainly this foundation creates the basis for these unacceptable behaviors to continue and to exhibit themselves in other circumstances.

Here's a good one...houstraining!! When a dog goes potty, they are doing what comes naturally...nature calls!! When we catch them in the act, we scold, we yell, we tell them they are 'bad dog' ...here's the kicker, we continue to scold and 'bad dog' all the way to the door & then...'you get out there and go potty'. Well, they were just scolded for doing what comes naturally INSIDE and they were scolded as they were put OUTSIDE...so, where in the heck are they suppose to go. House is bad...yard is bad...WHERE???!!!

Talk fairness, owners say they have given the dog their 'own' sock or shoe to play with and then, they want to know WHY the dog still goes after other socks or shoes....how can the dog possibly know the difference!!!

Let's talk COME. You call the dog...call the dog...call the dog. After the eighth or tenth time they finally come....well, by this point you are royally 'ticked off'. So when they DO come...you are not happy and scolding...I told you to COME!!! Well, believe me, if I am still trying to learn what COME means and when I do come...my person is NOT happy...I will not want to do that again!!!

Let's consider a new human baby in the family. Good, loving dog owners...really trying to do right by their furry baby....they make extra and special time for the dog...but, they keep dog away from baby. The dog soon learns that the only time things are GOOD is when this 'new critter' is not in the mix!!!

Talking terrier talk...terriers are very vocal and they can sound very ferocious and even

vicious to the 'untrained' terrier ear. They are the most vocal...they are the most communicative...but, you have to know how to 'hear' their vocalizations. Many first time terrier owners are not prepared for these vocalizations and misread them as aggressive. Again, much initial puppy play from owners will actually elicit and reinforce this vocalization.

Another example of their exceeding fair-mindedness is that they will, more often than not...WARN a dog or person before they lash out. One Westie I knew would 'warn' a Dalmation...three times...before he would actually inflict damage! He would do this 'three warnings' process repeatedly. The warning is the snipping at the air in the direction of the undesirable situation...with no intention of making actual 'contact'.

Now, consider an additional scenario in this same vein. The dog may be 'warning' (snipping the air in the direction of the offending stimulus). They do make 'contact' while in the 'warning mode...well, they zigged & you (or whoever) zagged. Hence, this would be incidental contact that may be perceived as aggressive. The reality is that the the dog is TRULY being exceedingly appropriate and well mannered.

Now, let's consider the Terrier that has bitten...but, did not break the skin. You have to understand the enormous power of the terrier jaws and the incredible quickness of the terrier's reflexes...IF they intend to inflict harm....they DO NOT miss their mark!!! These are the same dogs that can work and strike to kill poisonous snakes...they are that quick! They are listed in the top three of the most powerful jaws (pound for pound) in the dog world. The point being, if they intend to inflict harm...they do. By the same token, if they have not learned 'bite inhibition' they will not know how to control their jaws. Moreover, they may not understand that using their mouth can be unacceptable in certain situations.

In line with this discussion, I recommend the following applicable articles on our website:

- [Houstraining C.P.R.](#)
- [Crate Training](#)
- [Alpha](#)
- [Bites, Nips, Bite Inhibition & Puppy Mouth](#)
- [Philosophy For Training & Behavior](#)
- [Understanding Growl Sounds and Other Communications](#)
- [Growls-Evaluating Other Growls](#)
- [Puppy Mouths](#)
- [Puppy and Your Feet](#)

Remember, all dogs deserve the best opportunity, want to be accepted, and want to please. Understand that if they don't fit in...it is our fault, not theirs. If our wonderful

baby, suddenly develops inappropriate, aberrant, or unacceptable behaviors...look to the cause...the catalyst. These babies put their full trust and loyalty into us. They deserve no less back from us.

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