

# HUMANE SOCIETY OF INDIANAPOLIS

## Canine Aggression towards Humans

Aggression is any behavior meant to intimidate or harm a person or another animal. Growling, baring teeth, snarling, snapping and biting are all aggressive behaviors. Although aggressive behaviors are normal for dogs, they're unacceptable to humans. From a dog's perspective, there's always a reason for aggressive behavior. Because humans and dogs have different communication systems, misunderstandings can occur between the two species. A person may intend to be friendly, but a dog may perceive that person's behavior as threatening or intimidating. Dogs aren't schizophrenic, psychotic, crazy, or necessarily "vicious," when displaying aggressive behavior.

Aggression towards humans is a result of fear and/or conflict within the dog. The aggressive behavior is displayed when the dog's threshold has been met and his other attempts to avoid an undesirable situation failed. Aggression is complex, and the potential consequences are so serious, we recommend that you get professional in-home help from an animal behavior specialist if your dog is displaying aggressive behavior. Our Behavior Helpline can't assist you with aggressive behavior problems.

**Conflict Induced Aggression:** The behavior may be shown early on in puppy hood as play aggression, fear aggression or as an expression of conflict. The aggressive behavior is rewarded by the person retreating and leaving the dog alone when he exhibits the behavior. The dog learns that he can get himself out of an uncomfortable situation by exhibiting aggressive behavior.

**Fear Motivated Aggression:** Fear-motivated aggression is a defensive reaction and occurs when a dog believes he is in danger of being harmed. Remember that it's your dog's perception of the situation, not your actual intent, which determines your dog's response. For example, you may raise your arm to throw a ball, but your dog, perceiving this to be a threat, may bite you because he believes he is protecting himself from being hit. A dog may also be fearfully aggressive when approached by other dogs.

**Protective, Territorial And Possessive Aggression:** Protective, territorial and possessive aggression is all very similar, and involves the defense of valuable resources. **Territorial aggression** is usually associated with defense of property. However, your dog's sense of territory may extend well past the boundaries of his yard. For example, if you walk your dog regularly around the neighborhood and allow him to urine-mark, to him, his territory may be the entire block! **Protective aggression** usually refers to aggression directed toward people or animals that a dog perceives as a threat. Dogs become **possessively aggressive** when defending their food, toys or other valued objects, such as Kleenex stolen from the trash!

**Redirected Aggression:** This type of aggression is relatively common, but is a behavior that pet owners may not always understand. If a dog is aroused into an aggressive response by a person or animal that he is prevented from attacking, he may redirect this aggression onto someone else. A common example occurs when two family dogs become excited, bark and growl in response to another dog passing through the front yard. The two dogs, confined behind a fence, may turn and attack each other because they can't attack the intruder.

### What You Can Do

- ◆ First check with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior.
- ◆ Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal behavior specialist.
- ◆ Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine and/or restrict your dog's activities until you can obtain professional help. You're liable for your dog's behavior. If you must take your dog out in public, consider a cage-type muzzle as a temporary precaution, and keep in mind that some dogs can get a muzzle off.
- ◆ Avoid exposing your dog to situations where he is more likely to show aggression. You may need to keep him confined to a safe room and limit his people-contact.
- ◆ If your dog is possessive of food, treats or a certain place, don't allow him access to those items. In an emergency, bribe him with something better than what he has. For example, if he steals your shoe, trade him the shoe for a piece of chicken.
- ◆ Spay or neuter your dog. Intact dogs are more likely to display dominance, territorial and protective aggressive behavior.

### What Not To Do

- ◆ Punishment won't help and, in fact, will make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make your dog more fearful, and therefore more aggressive. Attempting to punish or dominate a dominantly aggressive dog is likely to cause him to escalate his behavior in order to retain his dominant position. This is likely to result in a bite or a severe attack. Punishing territorial, possessive or protective aggression is likely to elicit additional defensive aggression.
- ◆ Don't encourage aggressive behavior. When dogs are encouraged to "go get 'em" or to bark and dash about in response to outside noises or at the approach of a person, territorial and protective aggressive behavior may be the result.