



How to recognize and avoid aggression in your dog



Aggression takes many forms. Regardless of the size or breed of a dog, all dogs should be trained to not show aggression to any people or animals. Dogs are pack animals, and they look to their pack (“alpha”) leader for clues. If you, as your dog’s leader, accept another dog or a stranger, your dog should as well. Likewise, if you show fear, then your dog should naturally come to your aid. A typical problem occurs when a dog owner shows fear and therefore causes his or her dog to react inappropriately. When you fear that your dog might attack another dog or person, your dog senses that fear, and assumes you fear that dog or person. So, he may move to protect you. If you back away quickly from the situation, you are further establishing that this is a frightening situation that you want to avoid. In other words, common, gut reaction cues from you could inadvertently be helping to make your dog act more aggressively. There are many ways a dog can demonstrate aggression, some of which are very subtle. Aggression includes: barking, growling, lunging, snarling and, of course, snapping or biting. There are more subtle, often early stage, signs as well: stiff posture, hair raised on neck and/or back, tail held down – or even slowly wagging tail side to side. You need to get to know your dog and watch for his signs. The sooner you catch him getting upset and intervene, the better.

Here are some tests your dog should be able to pass:

- While eating or chewing on a rawhide or bone: Your dog should be able to be approached and petted with no reaction. The food or bone should be easily moved away from him or taken from his mouth, either with a verbal command, such as “drop it”, or simply with your hand. The dog should understand that you own these things, not him.
- Handling and petting: You should be able to pet your dog anywhere on her body, gently grab her ears or tail, and handle her paws with no reaction. Even a playful head-turn could cause problems if misinterpreted by a child, for instance. Also, this will ensure your dog will not have to be muzzled at the Vets or groomers.
- Accepting strangers: Your dog should be happy and calm when meeting new people or dogs. If your dog acts afraid of people or dogs, there is always a chance that the fear can turn to aggression. “Fight or flight” reaction means that if the dog can’t run from something scary, he will fight instead. Dogs and people will approach your dog whether you want them to or not, and you want him to happily smell & be smelled and/or be petted. If he is tense, he is not a happy, well-balanced dog. In fact, he might be dangerous.
- Walking on a leash: Your dog should walk calmly by your side and not pull. She should not show anxiety or fear. And, as the dog’s leader, you need to be walking her, not the other way around.
- Furniture and beds: If you allow your dog on furniture, then you need to ensure he will get off with a simple voice command. No hesitation, low growling, etc. should be tolerated. Again, it is *your* bed, not his.

If you have trouble passing any of these tests, you need to work with your dog, and probably a behaviorist, to make sure he can pass in the future. Even though some of these things might not seem like a big problem, they are signs of trouble brewing. Catching problems before they get out of hand is the key. You don’t want to wait until your dog actually bites someone to work with him. If your dog breezes through these tests, then your job is to keep doing them regularly to keep her in shape and make sure that new problems do not arise. Also, if your dog is a senior, and/or if a behavior seems very sudden or out of character (e.g. she suddenly doesn’t like her back leg touched), then you should see a Veterinarian. A common cause of dogs snapping is that they are in pain or discomfort.

Certain breeds need more discipline and leadership to assure they are under control. Breeds bred to guard, hunt or fight are at the top of the list, such as: Akitas, Chows, Dobermans, Pit Bulls, Rottweilers, and German Shepherds. There are also breeds known to be more “stubborn” who need a firm hand, such as: Boxers, Bulldogs, and most Terriers. These breeds are not for the faint at heart, so be prepared to provide much needed discipline and strength in order to keep them in line.

If your dog is showing *any* type of aggression towards strangers, dogs or especially any family members, you should immediately contact a dog behaviorist and work with them to get your dog to be calm and accepting of new situations, people and dogs – before it escalates to a higher, more dangerous level.

