

Aggression Due to Dominance

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"What should I do if I think my dog is becoming aggressive?" "Is this something my young dog will just outgrow?" "Are there some things I can do at home, and where do I start?"

Aggression in dogs is an important behavioral problem; in fact, it is the most common problem seen at animal behavior clinics. Like any other behavioral problem, there is no 'quick cure' for aggression. However, if an owner is willing to get qualified help and put in the time and effort required, aggression can usually be controlled. I am not an animal behaviorist, but like other veterinarians, I really sympathize with my clients who struggle to know how to deal with an aggressive dog. In this article, we will look at dominance aggression. We will also go over some useful tips, and some resources for owners looking for help.

Dominance aggression - What is it?

Most dogs are content to let people be in charge. As puppies, they quickly learn to look to us to let them know what we want them to do. Some dogs seem to have a harder time with this. A dominantly aggressive dog will consistently growl, snap, or bite when a person does something, or asks the dog to do something, which the dog does not like. This is different than a dog that is assertive or pushy, but will obey a firm command. This is also not the same situation as a dog which has been pushed beyond her limit by cruelty or pain. A dominantly aggressive dog has an inappropriate response to normal situations. The dog is trying to control the situation with her reaction, rather than allowing a person to have control.

These dogs may be protective over food or toys, or favorite sleeping areas. They may react if they are groomed, or if you stare at them, or if they are punished. In the beginning, the problem usually only occurs at certain times, for example, if you disturb your dog while she is eating. Then it begins to occur more often, when you move to place the leash over her head, or tell her to get off of the sofa, etc. The problem is not the situation, but the issue of control. Yelling, or physical correction such as scruffing, rolling the dog over, or "hanging" the dog by her collar or choke chain are not appropriate or effective form of discipline, and will only make matters worse. These attempts to "show the dog who is boss" may challenge the dog to be more aggressive, may injure the dog, and do nothing to teach the dog a more appropriate behavior in place of aggression.

Dominance aggression usually begins at around 18-24 months of age, when dogs become socially mature. Less commonly, it can occur in puppies as young as 4-5 months. While intact dogs may have a higher tendency towards dominance aggression, [spaying](#) or [neutering](#) alone will not solve the problem once it has started. Effective treatment involves behavior modification, combined with anti-anxiety medication, if needed.

What can I do about it?

As with any behavioral problem, some basic guidelines apply:

1. Set up an appointment with your veterinarian, to talk about the situation and have a thorough physical examination performed. Some rather common health problems can make an otherwise even-tempered dog aggressive. These include but are not limited to [epilepsy](#), [hypothyroidism](#), [arthritis](#), [hip dysplasia](#), and [dental disease](#). Your veterinarian may recommend some testing such as a [complete blood count](#), a [chemistry panel](#), or a thyroid test.
2. If your dog is aggressive towards people, be realistic with yourself about the situation. If the way your puppy nips at you when she plays concerns you, do not just hope that she will outgrow it, get some help to stop the behavior. If your adult dog growls when people walk past while she is eating, do not just assume that she will never take things a step further and bite someone. Problems like these are much easier to control early on, before you have a dog that you are afraid of, or that has bitten someone. Unless you have worked with dogs with behavior problems, the best way to help your dog is to get assistance from a professional. Choose a [trainer](#), [veterinarian](#), or animal behaviorist with lots of experience in this area. Especially if your dog has already bitten someone, doing the wrong thing can make the situation worse, with serious results. It can be very helpful to have someone to talk to and ask questions of, especially if your dog does not seem to be responding in the way you expected. If you choose to work on the problem alone, you are taking a tremendous responsibility for the safety of the people and animals that dog comes into contact with.
3. Increase the exercise. Dogs that get enough exercise are far less likely to have behavioral problems - of any kind - than dogs that are couch potatoes. How much exercise is enough? Most of us under-estimate the amount of exercise our dogs need: many trainers and behaviorists recommend 45-60 minutes of brisk exercise (until the dog is panting) twice a day! Running after the occasional squirrel in the back yard will not do it; the dog needs fairly continuous exercise to burn off all that energy he has built up while he has been waiting for you to come home. Play Frisbee with your dog; take her swimming, out in the woods to run, to a dog park, to doggie day-care. Take your dog jogging with you. Small breed dogs need plenty of exercise, too. They can go on long, brisk walks. They can play fetch. This is a game you can play

Seek professional help if your dog is showing aggression.



outdoors or inside in a long hallway. Use several balls, so you can keep things moving. Ask the dog to sit before you throw the ball each time. Also keep in mind that many types of dogs were bred to do a job. Give them the mental stimulation they need with obedience or agility classes, field trials, learning new commands, etc.



If your dog is not used to this much exercise, you will need to increase it gradually. If your dog has any health problems, consult with your veterinarian about a safe exercise program. Obviously, if your dog is aggressive to other dogs, doggie day-care or a dog park may not be a good idea. And exercise alone will certainly not be the total answer for a dog's behavior problems. However, increased exercise can really help to 'take the edge off' (think of how relaxed you feel after a good work-out).

Breaking the cycle of aggressive behavior

Dogs are individuals, and what works best to correct aggressive behavior is different in each case. Read and learn as much as you can. The following tips are often helpful for dogs with dominance aggression. Again, if things are at the point where there may be a danger to yourself or others, get professional help.

Avoid potentially dangerous situations. Do not do the things that cause an aggressive response in the dog, whether it is staring at the dog, hugging it, or disturbing it while it is sleeping. If the dog growls when her food dish is handled, give the dog something else to do while the dish is removed; fetching a ball, going for a walk. Do not use any treats or toys which may cause the dog to become possessive. If the dog starts to show any aggression, re-direct her attention. Take out the leash, or a favorite toy, and ask the dog to come to you and sit. You can also just walk away. Later, when the dog is calm and comes to you for attention, ask her to sit or lie down before you pet her. Keeping a long leash on the dog whenever she is inside can help you to move the dog when needed.

If the dog has already bitten someone, it may be best to have the dog wear a basket muzzle in the house, so that it can have social interaction with the family and not be isolated. Never leave a dog alone with a muzzle or leash on, indoors or out. Use a Gentle Leader or Halti head collar and make sure it is properly fitted. This is not a muzzle; it does keep the dog's mouth closed when gentle tension is applied, which has a calming, subduing effect. It also gives you much better control of the dog, since it works much like a horse's halter. Never leave a head collar on a dog in a crate, or if there is no adult present to supervise. Use a head collar outside for walks and inside during behavior modification exercises; it greatly reduces the ability of the dog to pull you where he wants to go.



Teach your dog that she must earn everything, from you and anyone else, with appropriate, calm behavior. From now on, anything your dog wants means that she must first do something for you, such as sit. You are in control, not the dog. Do not give the dog your attention on-demand. Ignore the dog if she whines, or pushes at you with her nose or paw.

Wait until she stops making demands and is calm. Then ask her to sit, and pet her. Make the dog sit or lie down and remain calm each time you give her treats, before you put the leash on, before going outside, before you throw the ball, etc. Several times a day, work with your dog on 'sit' and 'stay' commands, using small treats, and lots of praise.

Teach your dog that people have higher status than she does. Do not allow the dog to be on the couch or bed or in other places where humans sit or sleep. Do not let your dog stand up and put her front paws on your shoulders. Do not let your dog [jump up on people](#) at all. If the dog is going to jump up, ask her to sit or to lie down. When you come to a doorway, ask the dog to sit; then you go first and the dog follows. You should be the one to initiate playtime and decide when it will end. Avoid any games like 'tug-of-war' that may encourage your dog to be possessive about a toy. Practice having your dog come to you and 'drop' or 'give' whatever she is carrying. Any game of fetch should end with the dog giving the toy back to you, so that you 'win.' At mealtimes, prepare the dog's food, but do not give it right away. When the family has finished eating, make the dog sit and wait until you place the dish down and say "ok."

For any of these exercises to help, they must be used consistently, and the whole family needs to be involved. Owners need to be prepared to work at it for the rest of the dog's life. Once a dog has learned to defer to people, there are additional exercises which can be used. These are designed to 'desensitize' the dog to the situation in which it has shown aggression (for example, at feeding time or during grooming). These exercises can be very effective if done correctly. Depending on the dog and the level of aggression, these situations can also be dangerous. This is where I would recommend owners work with an experienced professional, if they are not doing so already.

Sometimes, medication is needed in addition to behavior modification exercises. Commonly used medications include [clomipramine](#) (Clomicalm), [amitriptyline](#) (Elavil), and [fluoxetine](#) (Prozac). Patience is important; it can take weeks to months for certain drugs to become effective. These medications are powerful, and may interact with other drugs, so it is essential for your veterinarian to prescribe them and monitor their use.

Resources for Owners

As noted above, your local veterinarian is the best starting point. He or she can assess the situation, prescribe medication if needed, and refer you to other professionals who are experienced with behavior problems in dogs. Many veterinarians are able to help with behavior modification. There are also many excellent trainers and other behaviorists available. The following web sites may be helpful:

Directory of Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists - www.animalbehavior.org
American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior - www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/