



# AGGRESSION BASICS

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## A brief look at the causes of aggression, and how to begin sorting out what's what.

By Suzanne Clothier

Part and parcel of canine communications are growls, snarls, snaps and even bites - even among the nicest of dogs and the mildest of breeds. We find these behaviors frightening, and sometimes don't quite know what to do. Unfortunately, there is a widespread misunderstanding of what constitutes aggressive behavior. Very often, what is labeled as 'aggression' is actually a useful and meaningful communication meant to avoid any violence. And at times, we overlook the fact that should a dog feel the need to act in a threatening way (whether to people, other dogs or other animals), there is a reason.

In my experience, dog behavior - especially that which we find frightening - is often poorly understood, leading to misunderstanding and frustration on both ends of the leash. No matter how fearsome we may find their behavior, we can find some relief in the knowledge that dogs act aggressively for the same basic reasons we do:

**Fear** This may be fear of a specific situation/person/other animal, or the fear that springs from incomplete socialization. Often the dog literally does not have the skills to adequately handle the interactions.

**Pain** This can be quite subtle at times - a dog who is tired and/or who has physical problems can have a much shorter fuse for being bumped by or even in the presence of exuberant dogs.

**Irritation** This can vary widely from individual dog to dog; again, physical/mental fatigue can make a dog more irritable than usual.

**Anger** Redirection of anger onto another dog or even the dog's handler is possible with a highly aroused and frustrated dog.

**Protection of territory** This may be the dog's home yard or a familiar practice area or even the handler's vehicle.

**Protection of family** In a sound dog, this should happen only when a serious threat is made; dogs quick to perceive a threat to the handler should be evaluated carefully - such hair trigger responses can be dangerous.

**Self defense** Perhaps the most common cause of dog-to-dog aggressive interactions.

**Protecting resources & possessions** This could be proximity to a special person, or actual resources like toys, food, crate, etc.

**Sexual conflict** This may be male/male competition, or females rebuffing unwanted advances, or sometimes males rebuffing females

**Social status** Excluding the odd occasional spat, resolving social conflict with aggression is often a sign of inadequate socialization with other dogs.

### Hunger/Thirst

**NOTE:** Like humans, dogs can act aggressively in abnormal ways due to biochemical imbalances, various diseases, genetic defects, psychological and/or physical abuse, drugs or chemicals, and for reasons science cannot explain. Like their human counterparts, such abnormal dogs are rare but can be extremely dangerous.

### Important Concepts in Understanding Aggression

**Dunbar's Fight/Bite Ratio** - how many fights has the dog been in? How many times has he done damage that required veterinary attention (incidental punctures on ear/head/face do not count.) A dog who has been in 3 fights and damaged other dogs every time is a more dangerous & difficult dog than a dog who has been in 30 fights and never damaged another dog. The Fight/Bite ratio tells you a good deal about the dog's bite inhibition.

Much of what we call aggression is actually behavior designed to avoid real conflict. Warning looks, growls, snarls and even threatening snaps & charges are intended to warn. A dog who intends to connect his teeth with another dog will do so unless something physically interferes with him (length of leash, barrier, etc.)

Handler involvement is critical. Without meaning to, handlers can contribute to aggressive behavior in any number of ways: tight leash, holding their breath/tensing muscles, punishing the dog for acting 'aggressively,' failing to recognize signs that the dog feels pressured, failing to set clear boundaries for behavior, failing to protect the dog from other rude dogs. One clear sign that the handler's involvement is key is this: The dog is aggressive on leash, is fine in off leash situations.

Need for clear assessment of the situation. Where were the dogs relative to each other? Where were the handlers and what were they doing? Very often, a dog is tagged as aggressive when the incident occurred while the dog was quietly laying down or sitting and simply responded to another dog who climbed onto him or invaded his space. This is very different from the dog who actively seeks out confrontation, and will move toward another dog in order to provoke conflict. As with any training problem, the careful trainer takes the time to clearly assess the problem before deciding on a course of action.

**All dogs** are capable of aggressive behavior, regardless of breed. The world's sweetest Labrador or Golden is still

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SUZANNE CLOTHIER  
PO BOX 105, ST JOHNSVILLE,  
NY 13452  
TEL: 518 568 3325  
SUZANNECLOTHIER.COM



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By Suzanne  
Clothier

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100% canine, and fully capable of the entire behavioral spectrum, including snarls, growls, snap and bites.

Aggression that occurs in the handler's vicinity is the handler's responsibility. Regardless of whether the problem was provoked by another dog (in which case the handler needed to protect/defend his dog) or his dog was the provocateur, handlers need to be proactive in their management of their dogs, provide clear leadership, intervene as necessary, and set clear boundaries for their dog's behavior.

Off leash socialization through early adulthood is the best

prevention for aggression problems. While many handlers utilize puppy kindergarten classes to help socialize their young dogs, it is the adolescent dogs who actually require more work. Generally speaking, a puppy's only real goal in life is to play, and in doing so, learn how to be a dog. Adolescent dog, like adolescent humans, have mastered those basic skills and now must employ them on a much more serious level: Who's in charge here? What are the rules? Where do I fit in? Unfortunately, during the critical months of adolescents and young adulthood, many handlers no longer permit their dogs to socialize with other dogs off lead - a time when they most need this experience.