



## **Dog Aggression**

This article is designed to help you better understand the reasons for dog aggression and give some advice on what to do should you be confronted by an aggressive dog.

I decided to write this article because it is the most common reason I get contacted for a behavioural consultation by dog owners. When I assess aggressive dogs I usually find there are other behavioural issues. However aggression, because of its nature and the potential danger, is the behavioural problem that really gets the owner's attention.

It certainly got my attention with my first rescue dogs. At the time I had two dogs, one aggressive towards other dogs and one aggressive towards people: talk about a double whammy!! As mentioned in my other article on Rescue Dogs, it was trying to find a way to resolve these issues that lead me on the path to becoming a dog behaviour consultant myself.

One of the things that surprised me most when I started my quest to help my dogs was the number of dog trainers that did not want to help with aggression issues. One told me over the phone (did not even want to come out and see the dogs) that there was nothing that could be done and the dogs sounded "too far gone". His recommendation was to put the dogs down. He wasn't the only one to give this advice, and it always saddens me that so many dogs are put down because of aggression. People don't understand, or want to understand, the underlying cause of the aggression. Many still think that once a dog shows aggression "there is nothing that can be done": the die is cast so to speak. This is not the case.

Other trainers or behavioural consultants trotted out the "you've got to show them who's boss" way of fixing the problem. I became totally disillusioned when someone who is considered to be one of the "best" trainers in Australia, and who has appeared on TV as one of our leading experts, was standing on a choke chain, choking one of my dogs. His justification for doing this was to force her to lay down. I can still see her eyes imploring me as she steadfastly refused to lay down. I do believe she would have choked to death rather than submit to the force that was being used on her. I was then informed by this trainer the only way my dogs were ever going to improve was a lot more work, and even more money than I had already spent. That sort of "work" I decided my dogs and I could do without.

Despite all of the advice to the contrary, I knew in my heart they were both good dogs. I also knew that there had to be a reason why they felt they had to behave the way they did. I really wanted to understand the cause rather than just addressing the symptom. After a lot of searching I finally found a method that teaches you the canine language called Dog Listening. Were their aggression problems fixed instantly? Certainly not, it is not a magic



wand. There is still "work" involved; and lots of patience. However the beauty of this "work" is that the dog is never abused or disrespected, either physically or verbally. It is all about understanding the canine mind and the canine language and how dogs are trying to cope with living with a species they don't understand - us.

### **What causes aggression in dogs?**

There can be a number of causes; however the most important one is that the dog sees itself as leader of its human pack. The alpha or leader's role is to protect his or her pack, so when they see a potential threat they must act to ward off the threat. As leader of its human pack, a dog is faced with a thousand and one threats, because anything the dog doesn't understand is a potential threat. And since the list of things a dog doesn't understand about the human world is endless, so are the threats.

When a dog sees a threat, their instincts have three possible ways of responding: flight, freeze and fight. Because fight can be potentially life threatening, dogs will use aggression as the last resort. Unfortunately humans can unknowingly force a dog into aggression because they have either taken away the dogs other options, or not understood the dog's method of communication.

### **Avoidance is the best option**

There is one sure fire way to avoid the leading cause of dog aggression. Don't ever approach a dog. Ever. Now considering the number of people that have done this in their lifetimes, and I was certainly guilty of this one in the past because I loved dogs, the question really should be: why aren't more people bitten by dogs? Thankfully most dogs are very forgiving of our poor canine manners. However when you see two dogs greet each other, you will rarely see them approach each other head on. They will normally arc around each other and yes, go to sniff the butt. Others will not approach each other at all. Dogs will generally not go straight up to another dog, face-to-face as this is confrontational.

It therefore should be no surprise that many people have issues with their dogs when they are walking them on lead head on towards another dog on lead, for example when people are walking their dogs passed each other on a sidewalk. It is a very confrontational situation for a dog, especially if the other dog is unknown to them. Even if your dog does not have the desire to attack another dog in this situation, avoid this situation anyway, as you can never know how the person's dog will act. Prevention is always best; arc your dog around the other person and their dog creating as much space as possible. If this is not possible, cross the road to create maximum space between your dog and theirs.



Even if you just want to pat a dog, don't go up to the dog, always call the dog to you. This is especially the case if the dog is on lead, or on a tether (not that I would ever recommend that you tether a dog, but unfortunately this practice still happens). Many people often wonder why their dog is aggressive on lead, but playful and friendly with people or other dogs when off lead. Why is this? Because the lead has taken away the dog's ability to take flight should they want to do so. With flight taken away most dogs will tend to go into freeze mode, where they stand immobile and tense. Unfortunately most humans don't pick up this signal, which leaves the dog no other choice but to go into fight mode. If the human is very lucky the dog may give a warning such as growling, however this will not happen in all cases. Again avoidance is always best, don't ever approach a dog.

This is true with your own dog as well. People, and in particular children who are bitten by their own dogs, in almost all cases have approached the dog. The best thing you can ever teach your children about dogs is to never go up to the dog. Instead teach them to call your dog to them. This is a 100% rule, in all situations, no exceptions. It is the simplest and easiest way to avoid any misunderstanding between canines and humans that could lead to aggression.

You may be wondering, if the most common cause of aggression is because the dog wants to protect its pack against threat, why would they bite or growl at their own pack member? As the leader, the alpha also makes the decision about how and when they interact with the other pack members. If you go up to your dog for a pat, a dog that thinks it is leader may allow you to do so. However as leader it can also decide that it doesn't want the affection and therefore may give you a warning to back off. By remembering the golden rule of calling the dog to you, the worst that may happen is that the dog will ignore your request.

Another common situation where a dog may show aggression towards their own pack members is if there is someone at the door, a dog going past the boundary etc. Should you approach your dog at this time, especially if they are agitated about the "intruder" they may respond by nipping or growling at you. Why? Because they are telling you in the only way they can, to get away from the "threat". They are trying to protect you by giving you a warning, similar to a mother smacking the child's hand that tries to touch a hot stove. In this situation, you need to recognise that the dog has not turned "vicious" they are trying to lead their pack as best they can in a world they don't understand.

However you do need to address the fact that they see themselves as the protector and decision maker for your human pack. A dog does not understand the difference between a visitor, or a postman, or an actual threat to the pack, i.e. a burglar. This is one of the main reasons why we can't allow our dogs to be leaders and why we should never accept or encourage our



dog's "protective" behaviour. I strongly recommend in this situation that you learn more about establishing leadership in a calm and gentle way, as having the dog elect you leader will remove their need to protect and therefore reduce potential aggressive behaviour. If you want to learn more about establishing leadership, I would suggest you read the book: Jan Fennell "The Dog Listener". There is also a DVD by the same name available, you can contact me via my website if you would like to purchase a copy. Alternatively you can arrange a consultation, see [www.siriuscaninecare.com.au](http://www.siriuscaninecare.com.au) for details.

### **What if you are confronted by an aggressive dog?**

Never approaching a dog will avoid most situations of potential aggression, but not all. We may sometimes be in a situation where we accidentally come across an aggressive dog, for example, you can just be walking along a street minding your own business when you are confronted by a growling, threatening dog. Because the dog is feeling threatened it stands to reason that the best course of action is to reduce the threat you pose to the dog. A dog that is growling is giving a warning, so take heed of the warning. Avoid your ego and any desire to "stand up to the dog". If you take on a dog, you will lose more often than not. They are quicker than us and have the ability to inflict greater damage with their multitude of teeth.

Dogs have a range of behaviours they all recognise as "submissive". When two dogs are interacting, if one shows dominant or aggressive behaviours, the other will try to reduce the chance of a fight by showing submissive body language. We need to provide the same signals of submission. The first thing that will reduce the threat is to stand still; running will only lead to a chase. Also avoid yelling or screaming, as it can be seen as a challenge to the dog. You want to calm things down, so avoid saying anything. Next, break eye contact with the dog. Staring at the dog will be viewed as predatory and challenging. Put your head down and watch the dog carefully from the corner of your eye. Just as if you were to come across a snake on your path, slowly back away, retreating in the direction from which you came. The dog may follow you for a little bit, but it will only be to ensure they have seen you off their territory. They may just want to make sure the "threat" has passed. As space between you increases, you can begin to increase your pace. However while you are still in sight of the dog, avoid the desire to run, however tempting.

### **What if an attack is unavoidable?**

Sometimes we may find ourselves in a situation where we cannot avoid an attack. For example, a few years ago I was jogging along the streets of Parkes in the early morning. Jogging in an unfamiliar town, I ended up in some back streets. I was jogging past a house, when barking alerted me to two massive hunting dogs in cages on a Ute parked in the front drive. Unfortunately one of the dogs escaped from their cage and decided to attack.



It was an unavoidable situation, I was going past his territory and he had been trained to go after a running target.

In the previous section I described some of the submissive behaviours, such as avoid eye contact and slow retreat. If this doesn't pacify the dog, then you need to become even more submissive. As the large hunting dog was running towards me, I crouched down. Crouching down in a ball, reduces our height dominance over a dog, making us less of a threat. It also reduces the "targets" for the dog to latch on to, namely our arms and legs. I then tucked my head into my knees and placed my arms over my head.

Will this stop the attack? Possibly, and possibly not. There is no guaranteed way to stop a dog, once it has decided to attack. What it will do is reduce the severity of the attack. I was still bitten by the dog. Considering the state of mind of the dog in that moment, its size, its training and the damage he was capable of inflicting, I could have been badly mauled had I handled the situation differently. Instead I had one bite on an arm, which only punctured the skin in a couple of places. In canine terms I had managed to convince the dog that I needed just a warning rather than a real show of force. Dogs only rarely continue with their attack on another dog, or a person, that is showing total submission.

### **What if it is my dog that is aggressive towards other people or dogs?**

Aggression, as mentioned before, is a symptom of a deeper issue; that of leadership. The dog believes it needs to protect themselves and their pack from a threat, i.e. people or other dogs. Learning the language of your canine will show your dog they no longer need to fill the role of leader and protector. How to best manage the aggression while you establish leadership will depend upon how, and in what situations, the aggression presents itself. It would be unprofessional and potentially dangerous for me to provide some generic recommendations without having conducted a proper in-house assessment of the dog. In a consultation with a qualified Dog Behaviour Consultant or "Dog Listener", they will help you address your dog's particular aggression issue. You can find a qualified Dog Listener at [www.doglistenersdownunder.com.au](http://www.doglistenersdownunder.com.au) All methods recommended by a Dog Listener to address your dog's aggressive behaviour will be gentle and respectful.

Aggression can be managed and resolved. My first two rescue dogs were my proof of that. My "people aggressive" dog is no longer with me, but that is only because a tumour claimed his life. However before his death, he learned to first accept and eventually enjoy having visitors come to our house. My "dog aggressive" dog that was "too far gone" has since had three other dogs come into our household. And every time we visit our property on the weekend, the same dog runs over to the neighbour's house to invite their dogs over to play and hang out. It always brings me joy to see her so relaxed



and happy around other dogs.

This is real life though and there is no “happy ever after” ending. It is important to add that I always manage how my former "dog aggressive" dog meets other dogs and I will continue to do so for the rest of her life. And if I was walking head on towards you and your dog on a narrow sidewalk, I will always take her across the road to give us both the space we need. I would also do the same with my other two dogs, even though neither has shown any indication of dog aggression. Why? Because I understand they are, and always will be, canines. They can't be anything else. And by thinking like a canine, I won't ever put my dogs (or someone else's dog) in a situation where they could see aggression as their only option.