



AGGRESSION & SOME REASONS BEHIND IT

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Understanding why a dog might feel the need to act aggressively, and recognizing the early signs in the dog's body language.

By Suzanne Clothier

Whether we like it or not, we need to recognize that the wide range of behaviors labeled as aggression are communications from the dog to us. Dogs do not snap, snarl, growl, or bite without reason, and those reasons can range from feeling afraid to being confidently challenging. If you are able to recognize early signs of dog feeling uneasy or pressured in some way (whether you intended that response or not!), you can avoid pushing dog into feeling the need for more dramatic or more dangerous aggressive behavior. Many of the dogs presented to me as aggressive are often quite fair about offering warning signs, but sadly, people have not been able to accurately read the signals the dog is sending. How frustrating that must be for the dog, who may then feel the need to escalate his own behavior in order to make his message clear!

Here are some typical clues that a dog is feeling pressured, and shifting from relaxed to another state of mind:

Shifts in breathing Typically, a dog who is feeling uncertain or threatened or is annoyed exhibits changes in the way he breathes. The breathing slows, becomes very shallow or is actually held (no breaths!). Watch rib cage or flank area? a normal relaxed dog is visibly breathing! A dog who closes his mouth, even briefly, may be offering a warning. Breathing may be monitored by visual observation, by hearing the shifts, and also by noting changes in the dog's breathing through your hands (helpful when you are handling a dog up close and may not be able to easily visually observe such changes).

Changes in whiskers Learn to recognize what's normal for your dog in terms of how he holds his whiskers when relaxed. A stressed dog (fearful, confused, overwhelmed) often folds the whiskers back against the muzzle. A dog who is angry or challenging may have whiskers brought forward.

Changes in head & eye movements A relaxed, comfortable dog has slow, easy movements of the head and eyes. The more rapid the movements you observe in eyes and head, the more panicky or fearful the dog is becoming, though this may rapidly escalate to a complete freeze of all movements but with the head and eyes turned slightly or markedly away from what concerns the dog. On the other end of the scale, the dog who becomes very still and stares at something with ears up and fixed (think "locked on target") is heading up the scale towards possible aggression or predatory behavior, with the whole body held quite still but oriented towards the target. Less dramatic but important shifts in head & eyes: dog looks away or turns head away from person or other dog; this dog is actively avoiding confrontation.

Freezing An overwhelmed dog may literally freeze - no movement, all body posture pulled back and down and/or away from threat. The danger here is that dogs in freeze may explode into fight or flight if pushed further. Do not mistake a

frozen dog for one who is gladly accepting whatever is happening - a common mistake that leads to "he just exploded with no warning." A dog who is accepting of whatever is happening continues to have normal movement of the body, head & eyes; a dog who is simply enduring an unwelcome or unpleasant event often freezes when he cannot escape, and thus the internal pressure continues to build as evidenced by the freeze. Should that internal pressure reach an intolerable level, the dog may explode in some dramatic behaviors.

Changes in shape and expression of eyes On the fearful/anxious end of the spectrum, the dog will look away from or glance sideways at the source of his problems, and the pupils may dilate considerably if the dog is really stressed. This change is due to shifts internally that result from the cascade of stress hormones (the ones that prepare a dog for flight/fight). Dogs are incredibly expressive in their eyes and facial muscles - attention to subtle changes here will pay off for anyone trying to understand the dog.

Changes in lips Get a feel for how the dog normally looks when relaxed, particularly how he holds his mouth and lips. Are the lips held tightly? drawn back? panting? drawn forward? Tension around the lips and muzzle indicate a problem. The more fearful/anxious the dog is, the more drawn back the lips become. When a dog is becoming annoyed or angry, the lips may tighten and the corners are drawn forward; you may even see an "rumpling" of the whisker bed, giving the dog's muzzle a "lumpy" look which precedes an actual snarl.

Increase in muscular tension As the dog's emotional state shifts, so will the overall tension in his body. Do not mistake stillness for "okay"! Sometimes, a dramatic shift can be seen in the dog's feet - look for clenching of toes, a sign I often see as the dog's fear/anxiety increases. Dogs who are confident & challenging and getting very annoyed or angry move "up" on their toes, whereas fearful dogs often clench or spread their toes preparatory to moving away (if they can). Of course, pay close attention to the degree of muscular tension throughout the dog's body.

Overall shifts in body posture Consider the overall "geometry" of the dog's body posture. Calm and relaxed results in the dog being balanced, neither looking drawn forward nor drawn down and away. Fear/anxiety based response: dog backs up, turns obliquely away from the problem, may even curve his body dramatically away while holding still. This dog is trying to avoid confrontation or hoping to escape from the situation. Aroused/confident/challenging: dog comes forward, shifts to sit from down or stand from sit, all body posture aimed at person or other dog. Friendly gesture - the dog may approach with decided curves in his body, neck and tail, even a lot of wiggles, and may offer his side, often accompanied by a lot of curves through the body, neck and tail.

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Determining The Cause

There are many different causes for the range of behaviors we may label as aggressive: barking, growling, snarling, lunging, snapping, biting. However, all these behaviors are not the same, and depending on the cause, need to be handled in specific ways. Simply labeling a dog's behavior as aggressive is not informative, nor does it help you understand what may be going on in the dog's mind.

When assessing any dog, be very specific about the behaviors you observe, as well as the precise body posture and the situation in which the behavior was presented. Precisely how, when, where and in what context the dog offers these behaviors needs to be examined in order to understand the dog.

As a rule, do not use corrections or punishment to handle behavior you consider aggressive. In most cases, treating any behavior you consider aggressive may result in the dog becoming more aggressive and possibly pushing him to escalating his own behavior and perhaps even biting. Remember - the dog has a reason for acting as he does, whether you understand it or not. Best rule of thumb: "Do not treat aggression with aggression of your own."

When in doubt, ask others what they observed in the dog. Build a careful picture: When this was happening, the handler did X, and then the dog did Y. Don't make assumptions or use non-specific language like "he freaked out". Be specific. For example, does "freaked out" mean the dog bolted away, crashed into the wall and only then lunged forward with loud barks? Or that the dog's pupils dilated dramatically, with ears laid back tight and then he lunged forward with a snap?

If you are unsure as to what caused the dog's response, give the dog the benefit of the doubt and assume that the technique, equipment or handler created the problem. Above all, don't take aggression personally! but do take it seriously as an important communication from the dog.

Here's some typical causes for behavior that may be labeled as aggressive:

Pain Induced Response

Typical symptoms: dog comes up lead when corrected using the lead or collar; may just snarl or growl or actually snap/bite handler. May also just yelp or scream.

Possible causes & solutions:

- tonsillitis (common in young dogs; suggest vet check up ASAP)
- correction too harsh (have owner moderate signal if corrections must be used, and do consider there are many ways to train that do NOT require corrections!)
- collar too much physical stimulus for dog (try milder collar such as martingale type or buckle; avoid equipment for cues; switch to lure/reward and/or operant conditioning)
- may have damage to or soreness in neck (switch to no-pull harness, have vet check up ASAP)

Pain in Specific Area

Typical symptoms: Dog may actively resist or growl when

handler tries to force/correct or even gently model dog into position. May be seen if handler asks for quicker sit, tries to roll dog over on one hip for long down, etc. Typically seen when dog is sore in back, through hips, has panosteitis (will especially resent having long bones of the legs grabbed/handled), joint pain.

Watch dog moving and specifically check how the dog sits - in a dog who is comfortable in his body, the sit should be quick, clean with no careful "adjusting" prior to or during the sit, and feet should be neatly tucked under dog and square. ANY deviation from this points to possible problem that may be causing dog discomfort.

Possible solutions: Suggest all dogs have x-rays of hips & knees if they are exhibiting signs of physical discomfort. Check also for tick borne diseases, which can leave dogs with very ouchy joints. May also suggest veterinary chiropractic. Know common breed problems and be alert to them (hip/elbow dysplasia, OCD, patella problems, etc).

Redirected Aggression

Typical symptoms: Redirected aggression is seen in situations where dog is fixated on another dog/animal, object or person, highly aroused and frustrated because they can't get to them. Any interference by handler (including attempts to attract dog's attention but especially leash corrections or hands-on corrections such as collar grabs, scruff shakes, muzzle grabs or slaps) may result in the dog re-directing his frustration onto handler. The dog may also redirect the aggression onto any other dog, person or animal in his immediate vicinity. Ideally, prevent situation which triggers this! The dog may be quite violent in redirected aggression.

Damage control: gain dog's voluntary cooperation in any way possible; do not use force to restrain, remove or move dog.

Rudeness by Other Dogs

Typical symptoms: dog noisily warns or actually bites other dog who has gotten into his space. Key point: Dog was minding his own business and under control at owner's side or where left, did NOT leave handler or place left to attack other dog. Watch for invasion of space by another dog, even one that is friendly (refer to article "He Just Wants To Say HI!"); retrievers & other "non-aggressive" breeds often at fault due to their handler's view of their dog as friendly and harmless. Most likely to trigger response in dogs with bigger personal space (working breeds, terriers).

Possible solutions: Instruct all handlers on rude/polite dog behavior which includes not allowing eye contact even across the room. Keep dog who caused the incident on long line and under instructor supervision when working on recalls or long distance stays. Keep the dog who responded to the rudeness well protected by barriers or people between him and the rude dog. All handlers have an obligation to protect other dogs from their own dog's "friendliness!" Instruct handlers of both dogs involved how to avoid problems in the future. If necessary, assign "red bandanas" to dogs needing extra space - this serves as a warning to other handlers that the Red Bandana dog should be given room and to not let



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their dog, however friendly, interact without specific invitation by the Red Bandana dog's handler.

Lack of handler leadership

Typical symptoms: Dog may actively resist being forced or even gently modeled into position by handler (i.e. tucked into sit or down) by growling, snapping, biting, or by wrestling, pushing handler away with feet, mouthing handler's arms & hands. The dog is saying that handler has not earned the right to handle him in such ways.

Possible solution: Do not force the issue but find reasonable compromise in class situation, and if at home, back off and find a way to gain voluntary cooperation or use of lure to avoid conflicts. Emphasize work on controlling resources at home to gain leadership & respect.

Overstimulation

Typical symptoms: The excessive stimulation may come from the collar or lead, the handler, corrections, the overall environment, other dogs or animals. Many mouthy dogs respond to overstimulation by grabbing at the handler's arms, hands, legs, feet, clothing, lead, etc. This is often not aggression but a response to too much stimuli; attempts to use force or corrections only pour fuel on the fire

Possible Solution: Remove dog to a "cool down zone" that offers a visual barrier and/or much more distance from other dogs/animals; reduce sensory input to the dog with quieter handling, less or no corrections, switch equipment to something milder, or change between equipment as necessary in any given situation. Work quietly and reward good behavior - careful not to use physical praise, big/fast hand movements or excited voice.

Fear based

Typical symptoms: Usually seen when approached by other dogs or people. May be afraid of handler; if so, watch handler's technique - may be too harsh. Watch for grabbing of joints, pushing down on hips or back instead of tucking, holding onto legs, pulling, pushing, etc. (This could end up with the dog both afraid and in pain.)

Possible solution: Encourage & show handler how to use softer approach. May need to switch to lure/reward only. If afraid of other dogs, respect this, put red bandana on to remind other students. See if you can find well behaved, well socialized dog who will lay quietly in a down and allow fearful dog to approach and sniff from behind. If afraid of people, use Treat/Retreat with all students participating to build confidence (can practice while instructor holds each student's dog; doubles as practice for CGC.)

PREVENTION HELPS!

Learn to identify potential problems which may result in aggressive behavior:

- Watch for dogs with no appropriate sense of personal space & handlers who allow their dogs to invade others' space
- Watch dogs who need extra room & space (may look unsure, frightened of other dogs approaching or get stiff, bark, growl) ? offer them a red bandana to buy them the space they need
- Eye contact to or from other dogs - usually accompanied by body postures (head up, tail up, stillness). This may also be true in dogs who react to eye contact from people, though they may also exhibit fearful, avoiding behaviors.

Resistance

Sometimes, aggression follows close on the heels of resistance, especially when handlers ignore the importance of resistance as meaningful information. Resistance or refusal to cooperate are important communications from dog which say he is:

- Confused or doesn't understand – Solution: back up to previous level, re-evaluate technique
- Feeling afraid or anxious or simply unsure – Solution: work to alleviate fear & build confidence
- Is bored (often seen with repetition of exercise dog does not find enjoyable) – Solution: STOP boring your dog!
- Isn't motivated (examine level of motivation) – Solution: find suitable motivation (better rewards, hefty paycheck)
- Is not physically able to do as asked – Solution: evaluate dog as athlete, work with the individual dog's limitations, do not ask for more!
- Does not respect the handler sufficiently to do what he's being asked to do in that particular situation – Solution: Build respect through Puppy Politeness Poker or other exercises.

Possible causes for resistance:

- Handler induced - watch the handler for changes in breathing, muscular tension, facial expression, movement. The dog will notice and respond to all of these!
- Equipment - may be giving signals to dog that are not clear or are too clear & overstimulating or simply too harsh
- Method - any technique which uses application of force may elicit reflexive resistance from the dog. Particularly true with pull or jerk on collar - if you must use equipment to send information, try a pulsed (give & take) signal, 'asking' not demanding

Find a way to address the resistance, and avoid the dog feeling the need to underline how he's feeling by escalating to more dramatic behaviors.