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Aggression In Dogs

- **What is Aggression?** Aggression is a form of communication for dogs to express a variety of emotional states. Aggression is often rated on a ladder (see ladder handout), with the aggressive behavior becoming more extreme as the animal gets increasingly uncomfortable. Mild discomfort or stress, often begins with behaviors such as yawning, licking their lips, or turning their head way. As the dog gets increasingly uncomfortable, they will progress to walking away, crouching with their tail tucked under them, lying down with their leg up, stiffening their body, growling, snapping and finally biting. While many of these behaviors are undesirable, growling and barking are actually helpful in telling us how an animal is feeling, and giving us warning before they escalate, allowing us to intervene with behaviour training.
- **Why Does Aggression Occur?** There are a variety of reasons a dog will exhibit aggression and determining what the cause is will determine the treatment and management steps going forward. Some main categories are:
 - **Fear:** This is one of the most common causes of aggression. An animal that is fearful will usually try to escape the situation and if that fails, will exhibit aggression to protect itself. Fearful animals may also lean that confident stances coupled with aggressive behaviour will scare strangers away and thus may not necessarily appear frightened
 - eg. a dog that growls and barks at strangers because it is fearful of new people
 - **Territory:** Some animals are protective of certain spaces (such as a yard, a room in the house etc) and will defend these spaces from things they deem to be intruders (other people, animals, vehicles etc).
 - Eg. A dog that barks and lunges at the door when delivery people approach the door
 - **Pain/Medical:** Animals in pain will often act aggressively when they feel threatened or if someone triggers their pain. This can include animals who have never shown aggression before. Many different medical problems can also cause aggression (due to pain or due to other hormonal or bodily changes) and a medical examination will be required to diagnose and address the problem. In some cases, this may be enough to resolve the aggression. In other cases, medical problems can worsen existing behaviour issues.
 - Eg. A dog with rabies, severe arthritis or a brain tumor

- Eg. A dog with aggression towards strangers that is worsened by her uncontrolled skin infection
- **Guarding:** Dogs can be protective of many things and defend them using aggressive behaviour. This can include food or water dishes, beds, people, other animals, their puppies, a favorite toy and many other things. This aggression is usually specific to the object/person they guard and so may be very friendly in all other situations but very aggressive when someone approaches their defended object.
 - Eg. A friendly dog who will bite people when they approach her when she is eating or when she is with her babies
- **Predatory:** This type of aggression is an instinctual drive found in many dogs and stronger in certain breeds especially those bred for hunting purposes. Unlike other forms of aggression, the purpose is not to intimidate another creature but to hunt and kill them as they might in the wild. Because of this, some behaviourists do not even consider this a type of aggression but more as a natural behaviour which can have serious consequences if not responsibly handled. Often this behaviour is directed towards small creatures (wildlife, small dogs, cats) or even young children. The animal may be fine around these targets at first but when the target moves a particular way or makes a certain sound, it can activate the predatory instincts and subsequent behaviour.
 - Eg. A dog that is very friendly with people but will chase and kill cats
- **Re-Directed:** This aggression usually begins as aggression towards something else (eg. a truck outside, another dog) which is then directed towards the owner or a nearby familiar animal. When animals become agitated and are unable to express their aggression on their target (either because they are separated by a barrier or by distance) they can re-direct their aggressive behaviour towards the nearest available target (often the owner as they try to interrupt the aggression or a nearby animal).
 - Eg. A dog that gets aggressive when it sees another dog on its walk and bites his owner when she tries to get him to walk away.

- **Why Punishing Aggression is Not Helpful**

- Punishment can include many different types of interventions but some examples are prong collars, leash corrections, shaker cans, spray bottles, and verbal reprimand among others.
- Punishment, as a general rule, is not helpful in addressing most behaviour problems. It may decrease the aggressive displays but it won't change the underlying emotional state of the animal and with aggression in particular this can have dangerous effects. Dogs that have been punished for growling or snapping, may not exhibit those behaviors but will still not feel any less threatened. Unfortunately, this means they may bite without warning and this can be very dangerous.
- Punishment often will lead to the animal becoming more anxious which in the cases of fear-based aggression can worsen the aggressive behavior or even create new fears that lead to or worsen aggressive behaviour.

- Punishment also can increase the agitation of an already agitated animal which can lead to them attacking the person giving the punishment.
- Overall, punishment does not work well to address most behaviour problems in animals and can be especially dangerous with aggressive behaviour.

- **Why “Dominance” Is Not A Factor**

- Dominance Theory is a very popular idea among many breeders, trainers and dog owners especially with regards to larger breeds but it is not one supported by scientific evidence (see the associated handout for more information of how animal researchers and veterinary behaviourists understand dominance).
- While dominance behaviour can occur between animals of the same species, it is rarely a cause for aggression but is commonly over diagnosed (missing much more common causes of aggression such as fear). It is only diagnosed after ruling out all other possible causes of aggression.
- Dominance is not a fixed trait of an animal. Instead, it is a behavioural response to a particular situation. A dog can act dominant in one situation and submissive in another.
- Remember that your dog cannot be dominant towards you, only to other dogs. Aggression being shown towards you or other people is much more likely to be due to other factors such as fear, territory or resource guarding.
- Remember, behaviours such as pushing past you to leave through a door, becoming impatient during meal preparation, pulling on the leash, jumping up on furniture or people, or aggressive behaviour are not due to your dog trying to “dominate you.”

- **What Can Be Done?**

- In order to properly treat aggression, the cause of the aggressive behaviour must be determined. A full medical history, examination as well as any associated diagnostic tests (such as bloodwork) should be done by your veterinarian to rule out potential medical problems that may be contributing to the aggressive behaviour.
- If no medical causes are identified or if they are currently being treated, your veterinarian may give you some suggestions for how to correct the problem. For advanced or complicated cases, a behaviour consult may be required.

- **Can Aggression Be “Fixed”?**

- As with almost all behaviour problems, aggression is generally “managed” and not “cured”. Treatment is often life-long with the expectation that aggression can be minimized but not eliminated entirely
- The prognosis for aggressive behaviour depends on a variety of factors (such as the frequency and intensity of the behaviour, how long it has been going on for and the age it started occurring). One of the biggest factors is the underlying cause for the aggression.

- Aggression caused purely by pain often resolves entirely once the pain has been adequately controlled
- Some types of aggression, like fear-based and guarding aggression can be treated reasonably well using behaviour modification, medication and avoiding triggers.
- Other aggressions like predatory and some medically-caused aggression can be very difficult to treat. Aggression that is very intense, frequent and has been going on for a long time will also have a worse prognosis
- Safety must always be a priority when dealing with aggressive animals. All treatment plans (except euthanasia) involve some level of risk as to the dog injuring another animal or person. Owning an aggressive dog means taking responsible precautions and always supervising them. In some cases, rehoming or euthanizing the animal may be the only safe solution.

Overall, we always recommend seeing your veterinarian whenever your dog begins showing aggressive behaviour. Acting sooner, rather than later, will increase your chances of successful treatment.