

My dog has recently changed his behavior and become aggressive. Is there a good reason for this?

There are many reasons why a dog could become aggressive. Sometimes a medical problem could be the reason. For example, a brain tumor or vision/hearing problem could develop and cause this change. Most commonly, it is a behavioral or environmental reason.

In all instances, the events surrounding the incident must be carefully examined. For example, if a burglar entered the house and the dog bit him, he's a hero. Now if the same dog bites your son's friend as he enters the house, he's vicious. From the dog's perspective these are very similar events; a stranger is entering the territory it claims.

One of the common reasons people are bitten by dogs is a fear reaction. If a dog is uncomfortable with a situation it normally seeks to escape that situation. If escape is impossible, it may choose to become aggressive. This is the classical fight or flight choice all animals demonstrate.

We can help our dogs avoid this problem with proper socialization. This means that as a young puppy, from 2-4 months old, we positively introduce it to all types of situations. We reward the puppy when he is comfortable and explorative; ignore him if he seems fearful. Sadly, if a puppy is not exposed to situations, it may be fearful of these things as an adult.

Another common reason for dog aggression is problems with the dominance order within the "pack." Dogs and humans have very similar social rules, but not identical.

Things we normally do for our dogs, such as letting them demand affection, food, walks, etc., may actually reinforce that the dog has a higher social status than the person. If the dog believes he has the dominant position, he will react accordingly.

In dog terms, this gives him the right to defend his social position and its access to resources it grants. So, taking a prized possession, like the sock he has, is not allowed by someone of your lower status.

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Usually overt aggression is the last resort; warnings such as growling or snarling usually work. But if these warnings are ignored, a bite is legal within “dog law.”

We avoid these dominance problems by constantly reminding the dog that it has a lower status than the person. We reinforce this by asking the dog to submit, usually simply sitting, before it receives anything; food, toys, affection, etc. This is much like teaching our children the magic word, please.

This is a little insight as to reasons for aggression but an appointment with your veterinarian to evaluate your dog for aggression is just as important as if the appointment was to evaluate for vomiting or coughing. Like all problems with your animals, a veterinarian has the knowledge and experience to help advise you. Your veterinarian can help you select the proper pet for your home, how to raise that animal as a well adjusted member of your family, and help diagnose and treat any problems that arise. Please consult your veterinarian if you are concerned about your pet’s behavior.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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