



# Understanding Aggressive Behavior in Dogs

**A** *DOG'S BARK MAY BE WORSE THAN HIS BITE*, but most of us would rather not find out the hard way. Growling, baring teeth, snarling, snapping, and biting are all aggressive behaviors—but dog aggression includes any behavior meant to intimidate or harm a person or another animal. Although these messages are among the handful of communication tools available to dogs, they're generally unacceptable to humans. Because humans and dogs have different communication systems, misunderstandings can occur between the two species.

But from a dog's perspective, there's always a reason for aggressive behavior. A person may intend to be friendly, but a dog may perceive that person's behavior as threatening or intimidating. Dogs aren't being schizophrenic, psychotic, crazy, or necessarily "vicious" when displaying aggressive behavior.

Because aggression is so complex, and because the potential consequences are so serious, we recommend that you get professional in-home help from an animal-behavior specialist if your dog is displaying aggressive behavior.

## Types of Aggression

### Dominance Aggression

Dominance aggression is motivated by a challenge to a dog's social status or to his control of a social interaction. Dogs are social animals and view their human families as their social group or "pack." Based on the outcomes of social challenges among group members, a dominance hierarchy or "pecking order" is established.

If your dog perceives his own ranking in the hierarchy to be higher than yours, he'll probably challenge you in certain situations. Because people don't always understand canine communication, you may inadvertently

challenge your dog's social position. A dominant-aggressive dog may growl if he is disturbed when resting or sleeping or if he is asked to give up a favorite spot, such as the couch or the bed. Physical restraint, even when done in a friendly manner (like hugging), may also cause your dog to respond aggressively. Reaching for your dog's collar or reaching over his head to pet him could also be interpreted as a challenge for dominance. Dominant-aggressive dogs are often described as "Jekyll and Hydes" because they can be very friendly when not challenged. Dominance aggression may be directed at people or at other animals. The most common reason for fights among dogs in the same family is instability in the dominance hierarchy.

### Fear-Motivated Aggression

Fear-motivated aggression is a defensive reaction and occurs when a dog believes he is in danger of being harmed. Remember that it's your dog's perception of the situation, not your actual intent, which determines your dog's response. For example, you may raise your arm to throw a ball, but your dog may bite you because he believes he's protecting himself from being hit. A dog may also be fearfully aggressive when approached by other dogs.

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