

Port Macquarie Dog Club Inc.

DOG BEHAVIOUR RELEVANT TO AGGRESSION

Meeting and Greeting

Centuries of selective breeding and careful socialisation has increased domestic dogs' overall tolerance of strangers. However, some dogs are not tolerant of strange dogs or people, or lack the social skills to greet and mix with new dogs in an appropriate manner.

Properly conducted dog socialisation aims to teach dogs the correct meeting and greeting etiquette. Dogs that haven't learned such etiquette can trigger aggression in other dogs, even if their outward behaviour seems friendly. Many dogs that handlers consider very friendly are actually behaving rudely in dog terms. Rushing into another dog's space, direct head-to-head initial contact or bouncing on a strange dog are all rude in dog language. An intolerant dog may react aggressively to such an approach and any dog may be frightened.

Aggression

Whatever the motivation, aggressive behaviour is highly undesirable and potentially extremely dangerous. All dogs carry the potential to express aggressive behaviours, but not all dogs show the same levels of aggression. Levels of aggression are dependent on three factors: Motivation, Arousal and Reactivity.

1. Motivation

Some dogs are described as 'fear aggressive' others are 'intolerant of strangers', 'dominant', 'resource guarders' or 'prepared to finish what another starts'. All of these types of dog possess the motivation to behave aggressively towards other dogs.

2. Arousal

Arousal is the trigger that produces behaviour. Some dogs are easily aroused, others are far more placid. Triggers to arousal include: resource guarding, conditioned excitement (i.e. learned by exposure to certain situations or locations), high drive situations such as running in packs or chasing balls, and unfamiliar situations.

Signs of high arousal in a dog include:

- high pitched barking
- ears held forward or erect
- raised hair on the neck, back or other areas of the body
- tail held stiffly and higher than normal
- slow, deliberate tail wagging
- taut, stilted body language
- dilated pupils

Most dogs on the Club grounds will be in a higher than normal arousal state, particularly early in their training (this is one reason why you may initially find it difficult to hold your dog's focus). If your dog has reached a very high state of arousal, its ability to respond to your cues is diminished due to its altered brain function. Studies have shown that a dog in very high state of arousal can divert parts of its brain function away from hearing and towards sight and locomotion. Thus your ability to control your dog can be enormously diminished.

To avoid an incident a dog in a high state of arousal should not be allowed off-lead. High levels of arousal can last for some time.

3. Reactivity

In the reactive dog, the behaviour response to a stimulus is quick. With aggressive behaviours, high reactivity is dangerous. Couple any trigger to arousal with a reactive dog and you have a highly volatile situation.

Off-Lead

Dog incidents

While scuffles between dogs may be dismissed by many handlers as nothing much, they point to the possibility of more serious behaviours developing if not properly managed.

Dog attacks

A high number of dogs off-lead together can result in a pack being formed. Highly aroused dogs in a pack situation can be extremely unpredictable. When a dog attack occurs, few handlers will have any idea what to do and by the time a knowledgeable person arrives who is prepared to wade in and separate the dogs, it may be too late to prevent injuries. Using unsuitable methods to separate fighting dogs can also result in serious injuries to handlers.

Other undesirable behaviour

Poorly-controlled dogs can learn a variety of undesirable behaviours. These include fear, aggression, very rough play and to ignore their handlers. If your dog ignores your cues in an off-lead situation you are effectively undermining your training effort as well as putting you, your dog and others at risk. The key issue with off-lead exercise is that the safety of each dog and handler is completely dependent on ALL the handlers' knowledge of dog behaviour and control of their dogs. You place your dog's safety in the hands of others every time you allow your dog to run off-lead with other dogs, and that knowledge and control can vary widely.

TRAINING

Essentially it is through training that owner/handlers attempt to increase communication between themselves and their pets. The primary mantra of dog training clubs is on focussing the dog's attention. Maintaining a dog's focus enables the handler to direct (or redirect) a dog's attention to a particular focal point. This is critically important where a dog begins to exhibit aggressive behaviour and the owner/handler can quickly recognise these traits and then avoid an incident by redirecting the dog's focus away from another dog.

In order to gain a dog's attention you must establish a positive relationship based on trust, safety, care and training. The various strategies available will require consistency, persistence and encouragement from the owner/handler.

Aggressive displays that may precede a likely aggressive attack include any of the '*Signs of high arousal in a dog*' listed above in '*Dog Behaviour Related to Aggression*', and may also include:

- prolonged dog to dog eye contact (staring)
- stepping towards another dog
- showing of teeth and growling

These sorts of signals should have the owner/handler immediately adopt steps that redirect focus from the other dog towards themselves. It is also important that the owner/handler do nothing that the dog may think is reinforcing the aggressive behaviour, and instead reward re-focused behaviour, and that the new focus is maintained in order to avoid the dog returning to an aggressive posture.

Finally, desensitisation should be used to expose the dog to low levels of frightening stimuli and gradually increasing the level at a rate which does not cause distress. The dog needs to be presented with rewards and praise during this procedure.

