

Territorial Aggression

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Dogs have a normal, inherited drive to defend their territory, and most dog owners want their pet to alert them when someone comes to the door. Problems arise when this drive is extremely strong and the dog growls, lunges at, or bites visitors. The problem is compounded when the dog learns that it can frighten away visitors, as most people confronted with a growling or snapping dog quickly back off. Once the dog learns how effective aggressive behaviour can be, it increases with intensity and becomes more difficult to eliminate.

Dogs express territorial aggression in many ways. The dog may bark aggressively, growl or lunge at visitors. Some dogs calm down once the visitor is in the home, but threaten if they move quickly or approach the owner. Dogs that wag their tail while growling are torn by two conflicting desires. They want to greet the person, but also want to warn him off. These dogs are particularly dangerous because many people mistakenly believe that a dog wagging its tail will not bite. Territorial aggression is often first noticed when the dog is 6-7 months old. The dog may be friendly on neutral territory, and is often only protective of one specific thing (the car or backyard for example). Fear may be combined with territorial aggression. A fearful dog growls, but backs off if approached. However, when the person turns his back and presents a less threatening stimulus, the dog's territorial aggression outweighs its fear, and it may bite the person on the back of the leg or ankle.

CAUSES OF TERRITORIAL AGGRESSION

1. The dog inherits a drive to protect its territory from its parents. The intensity of this drive varies between individuals. Problems occur when the drive to protect territory is very strong. Because the drive is inherited, it is difficult to alter.
2. Territorial aggression problems are often exacerbated by learning. The dog learns that if he growls at people, they will go away. Yelling at the dog or punishing him will not prevent the behaviour, but will often increase the aggression.
3. Although the behaviour may be seen in both male and female dogs, dominant male dogs are most likely to exhibit territorial aggression.
4. Excitement usually makes territorial aggression worse.
5. The size of the territory seems to have an effect on the expression of territorial aggression. Dogs that are confined by a short chain often show more intense signs of territorial aggression than those that are loose in a yard. Some dogs are aggressive when walked on a leash, but are fine when heeling off-lead.

TREATMENT OF TERRITORIAL AGGRESSION

Generally, it is easier to train the dog to do something acceptable than it is to punish him or correct the wrong response. In fact, punishment, be it physical or verbal, is likely to exacerbate excitement and aggression. Instead, you should teach your dog to lie down quietly on his bed in situations which usually elicit aggressive behaviour.

6. First, teach your dog to do a 20 minute down-stay on his bed. Reward the dog with bits of food as long as he stays. You will initially need to start with short intervals (10 seconds) but you will be able to increase the interval as long as the dog learns what is expected of him.
7. Once the dog does the down-stay reliably, have the dog lie on his mat and stay, and then have someone walk up your driveway to the point at which the dog usually starts to react (you need some very dedicated helpers for this). Reward the dog for staying quietly. The person should wait briefly and then leave.
8. Gradually, you make the stimulus more exciting. Have the person come closer and closer on consecutive trials, always rewarding the dog for remaining quiet.
9. Over many sessions, reward the dog as he is gradually exposed to and accepts the following:
 - someone knocks on the door or rings the bell.
 - the door opens, but no one is seen on the other side.
 - the door opens and the dog can see a stranger at some distance from the house.
 - the stranger approaches the house.
 - the stranger enters the house and stands just inside the door.
 - the stranger enters and moves into the house as a normal visitor would.
10. If the dog shows any aggression (barking, growling, etc) stop the training session, ignore the dog for 5-10 minutes, and start the next session at a previous level where the dog behaved well. If the dog is very threatening, you may want to put a muzzle on him while you are training him, to make your volunteer “strangers” feel more secure.
11. It is useful to keep records. Training your dog can take several months, and can be discouraging if you do not have records which show the improvement your dog is making. The headings of the chart could be similar to the following:

| Date | Place | Who | Distance | # of Trials | Response |
|------|-------|-----|----------|-------------|----------|
|------|-------|-----|----------|-------------|----------|

Once you start training, it is important that you prevent your dog from ever showing aggression again. Any time that he manages to perform the unwanted behaviour, you set the training back by weeks or months. Confine him to a room or a crate, put him outside, or put him on a leash in situations where he is likely to be aggressive.

Castration does not reduce territorial aggression. However, it is a good idea to castrate aggressive dogs to prevent them from passing this inherited characteristic on to future generations.

Drugs are not helpful in the treatment of territorial aggression.

Although we are here to give you all the advice and support that we can, you are the one who must train your dog. If you have any questions or problems, please call and we will do whatever we can to help.