

BOUND ANGELS

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Causes of Aggression

Before I begin to address this topic, I'd like to address the misguided people who diagnose a dog as aggressive without proper evaluation. I've fought court battles over this topic, done proper behavioral assessments and re-diagnosed many dogs that were thought "aggressive" that were truly not aggressive at all. On the other hand, I have dealt with more than my share of dogs that were truly aggressive. What is unique in my experience is that most of the dogs I deal with are living and doomed to die in shelters, and I know nothing about them before I meet them. I'm not the guy who gets a nice form filled out and diagnoses the dog that will nip at someone who came to the door last Saturday. This is also not my goal. I would be happy to never call myself a trainer or a behaviorist, I do it because it is my goal to save the lives of the dogs that are doomed by our shelter system and keep the others from ending up there.

So, let's assume we are dealing with a dog that is truly aggressive. Let's analyze what makes a dog act aggressive when in fact we have domesticated these animals for thousands of years, and they have lived in our homes and with our families for so long. Remember, as I said above, most dogs are NOT aggressive, they are merely misguided, confused, scared or just being dogs. Dogs bite when they play, so even many dog bites are not the result of true aggression, but rather the result of "being a dog." Dogs grab things, including people and other dogs with their mouths for the simple reason that "They lack to opposable thumb," and have no other choice. A dog mouthing something, including, your arm, your pant leg and possibly your face, may be the result of the dog playing. If you watch puppies, they constantly grab each other's faces with their teeth. Dogs growl, snap and pull out of instinct. If we do not deal with this instinct and create / develop a more acceptable behavior, then we are at fault, not the dog. I will address this in another place, but here I would like to delve into the cause(s) of some aggression or "bad behavior" in our canine friends.

To start with, the single most common reason dogs are aggressive (and I will use this term lightly here) is because of human error. This starts with improper socialization at a very early age. Any and all experiences a dog has in the first formative weeks of its life will, to some degree influence who the dog becomes. Taking dogs away from their mothers too early, removing a dog from its litter mates too early and not introducing human interaction can cause an instability in a dog's developing behavior. As well, not introducing a dog to the elements of the real world early on can be damaging to how the dog sees things.

The single most important thing we can do to a dog is twofold:

1. Form a strong bond with the dog from the very first time you interact with your dog. This bond consists of absolute fairness.
2. Make EVERY experience the puppy has a positive one. Protect your dog from getting hurt on the stairs or getting bit by another dog and your dog will not fear these things in his later years.

By spending some time in the formative weeks and months we can solve a lot of problems. Most of the dogs that I deal with in training unfortunately did not have these tools. I can tell you that undoing these strong imprints is a lot of work and it takes a special person to be able to follow through on the steps it takes to fix the dogs. Just putting a prong collar on the dog and yanking him around when he acts up is NOT the answer.

If a dog meets many dogs in his development period and all of them offer him a positive experience, chances are the dog will have no issues with other dogs. If your dog, on the other hand, never meets another dog because you are afraid that he might get hurt, he will not know how to play or how to interact with other dogs and his behavior later can and will get him in trouble. An important point is that your dog should always see you as a higher value item than another dog. This comes from proper bonding with your dog from day one. There are several things we must do to develop, strengthen and reinforce this bond, they include:

1. Handling
2. Game playing
3. Hand feeding
4. Experiencing new things together
5. Learning to be around you in a calm manner. That is to say, you don't always have to be "on" nor does your dog always have to be "on" when you are around each other. Just hanging in the same room is a strong bonding experience to a dog.

I would suggest your research your need for vaccines in your area and many breeders, behaviorists, trainers, and vets opinions on vaccinations varies, so I will leave that up to you, however I would suggest you do your research before you make any decision. Once you are able to take your dog out, EVERYTHING your puppy experiences is positive.

Leash aggression is one of the most common complaints I have see, and the reason it develops is often from a bad experience on a leash at an early age. If your dog gets bit when he is walking on a leash, chances are he will have a negative association with the leash and other dogs. It's often better to keep your dog away from another dog if you don't know the other dog rather than take a shot. It's important to note that when one dog is on leash and other is off leash their interaction will be much different.

Dogs have no reason to be aggressive on a leash and I would stress the importance of a dog meeting many dogs on leash, allow a brief interaction and then call your puppy back to you. I said, call your puppy back to you, which would be done once your dog sees you as a higher value item than another dog: this will be done by following the bonding exercises above. I do NOT like when I see people yanking their puppies back to them. A slight tug on a leash is one thing, but still not something that I see as necessary if you have a strong

bond with your dog. If a dog starts to associate a yank on the leash with the other dog he is playing /interacting with, it will be a negative experience. Instead, I would suggest a toy or a treat to redirect your dog back to you.

For those people who question or find this technique too wimpy, I would say that they have very little experience with dogs and are merely trying to bully a puppy to exert their own machismo. Treats and toys should be just about the only thing necessary to work with a puppy. Remember, EVERY experience should be a good one.

The more dogs your dog meets without incident, the less likely you are to have problems with your dog around other dogs later.

A dog also needs to experience people in his developmental period. Dogs that meet all sorts of people early on and have positive experiences with all of these people will generally like people. Dogs that are kept away from people develop anti social behaviors to strangers and are likely to bite. I advise to introduce a puppy to many different people considering they are dog savvy. They should know how to handle a puppy and how to play with them. They should not be too rough with the puppy; they should let the puppy be a puppy. If there is a question, give them a handful of your dog's favorite treats and let them give them to him. This is very important with kids. We try to make our dogs see kids as good things, not as play objects that scream and run away like squirrels.

Dogs that have great interactive experiences with people at an early age will almost always develop into very people-friendly dogs. An important note here is that YOU must remain the most interesting thing to your dog. He must understand that YOU are more fun, interesting and desired than the other person. If the dog starts to see every stranger as super fun and full of treats he may become so easily distracted that you can't get him back.... This is very rare and easy to avoid by assuring that you remain your dogs favorite "Toy."

Environments play a very important role in a dog's eye. There are dogs that hate stairs, tiled floors, mirrors, loud noises, skateboards, bikes, etc. all because they were never properly exposed to them. All of these environmental issues can cause a dog to develop fear-based aggression such as dogs that are constantly chasing kids on skateboards. If your dog is exposed to these things early on and is given praise, treats or played with in their presence they will become transparent to him in his later years. The key I like to focus on is a dog that is neutral to outside distractions. A dog that is too playful with something like a skateboard or a ball can learn to play intensely and that might eventually be seen as aggression (which its not).

A note on toys: Many people make huge mistakes with toys in that they give their dog a toy and just walk away. I feel that toys should be something that bonds humans and dogs instead of replacing the human touch. For example a ball or a tug is a game that the dog will share with me and will start and stop on my cues. Toys belong to me and are played with only with me. If I remove the toy, the game stops. The dog does not initiate the

game, I do. This is what makes the dog bond to me, and he then see me as the source of fun instead of his mere desire to play. Toys are much more fun with me then alone.

Overall, a dog's world is shaped by his surroundings and his experiences. We can teach a dog that other dogs are good or bad, we can teach them to love people or hate them, to fear them or see them as the source of good things. The work is hard yet fun, but it is nonetheless work. Dogs require time and that does not mean getting a dog and shipping it off to a trainer. How the dog sees the world has a lot to do with whom he sees it with. It's your dog, if you're going to make the commitment, do it right. If you don't, you are part of the problem of the millions of dogs that are killed in the shelters every year. Animals are not disposable, they are living beings that have a right to a happy life, just like you and I.

No socialization or improper socialization as a puppy is the number one cause of aggression in adult dogs. The smallest reason dogs develop aggression is medically based. These dogs are very rare and are often incurable through training.

Some other things that are important to consider with your puppy are handling issues. That includes other people touching your dogs paws, ears and hind quarters, visits to the vets office, to strange houses, cars, etc. Making every experience a happy one is easily done by giving the dog a treat, praise or a toy before, during and after a new experience.

In closing I find it paramount to stress the importance of proper evaluation for aggression by a qualified professional and then, I would suggest you get a second opinion. Hundreds and thousands of dogs are doomed every year because of improper evaluation or ignorance. True canine aggression is very rare, and other misunderstood behaviors are often labeled "aggression" as its an easy cloak to drop on a misunderstood behavior. Dogs are dogs and act differently than humans. Humans can shout, scream and carry on and not be evaluated as "violent," but the first time a dog growls or bares its teeth, they are generally doomed.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

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