

LePar Animal Hospital
3811 W. 95th St.
Evergreen Park, IL 60805
708-423-3200
www.leparvet.com

Dominance Aggression

The most common behavioral problem with dogs that are aggressive is dominance aggression. Any dog that is aggressive for any reason can be potentially dangerous to humans and to other dogs, but dogs with dominance aggression can be particularly dangerous because their problem is rooted in a struggle with people over control.

Much has been written about dogs' perception of people as part of their pack. This simplifies the situation. It is more likely that dogs and humans are able to live successfully together in all the situations that they do because dog and human social systems are so similar. Dogs live in extended family groups, have extended parental care, and use extensive vocal and nonvocal communication. More important, dogs have social systems that are based on deference, not on physical violence and control.

Many people envision dogs as constantly fighting for control and status. In fact, every study of wolf and wild dog behavior has indicated just the opposite: aggression and violence are the exceptions. The key to the domestication of pet dogs and to humans' working and service relationships with them is based in this social similarity: both social systems are maintained by deference structure and extensive signaling systems that communicate deferential and other behaviors. This means that there is a hierarchy and that some animals in both systems are higher ranking and others are lower ranking, but this hierarchy is relative, not absolute. Status can be affected by the relative age and sex composition of the social groups and by performance or skills. Because dogs share so much in common with people regarding social structure, they also share many signals that we can recognize. Most people are able to recognize the message conveyed by dog signals, but many people have trouble with cat signals. Cats are not derived from animals that share our social systems, and we have not selected them to act in the same capacities as we have selected dogs. Canine signals are recognized because of convergent social systems. Unfortunately, this also presents a problem.

The same type of signal can be given in a context in which we, as humans, would recognize the signal to mean one thing and the dogs would recognize it to mean another. For example, most people state that they think their dogs are giving them a "hug" when the dog places its paws on the person's shoulders. More often than not, this is not a hug, but rather a challenge. In communication between dogs, pressing on another using the front feet is an unambiguous challenge. Dogs do not "hug" in the same context as do humans. In fact, many humans have been squeezed by others under the guise of a hug and correctly recognized the gesture as a threat. This is the importance of context.

The issue of mimicry further complicates the interpretation of situations involving "hugs" or "smiling." People can teach their dogs to hug on command or unintentionally teach them to do this by rewarding with attention what the people perceive as loving behavior. Another example of mimicry occurs when clients say that the dog "smiles" at them when they play. First, dogs do not have the same facial musculature as people (that is why they do not have as many facial expressions) and do not technically "smile" in the same sense as humans. We all know what we mean when we see a very happy dog with mouth open and mouth pulled back, but it would not be correct to attribute to that gesture all of the interpretations humans use when they talk about "smiling." In some human cultures smiling is a threat. Second, in interactions between dogs the "smile" is not seen. However, dogs are great mimics and can learn to be rewarded with love and praise for a facial expression that the human finds pleasing.

The preceding discussion is very important in treating dominantly aggressive dogs because most people do not recognize the majority of behaviors that are correlated with dominance aggression as problematic. These dogs are focused on control; to help them it is imperative for the client to recognize and abort even subtle behaviors associated with dominance aggression. Dominantly aggressive dogs routinely dislike being pushed from a sofa or a bed, will act aggressively when a human stares at them, dislike having their shoulders or back pushed on, may react aggressively when someone reaches over their head (even if this is only to put on a leash), may become aggressive when corrected verbally or with a leash, and intensify their aggression if physically punished.

Many such dogs are quite subtle and cause clients to redirect their activities. These dogs will lie in front of doors or furniture so that the person has to avoid those areas and may lean against or have a paw resting on the client at every opportunity. Clients often ask how they can distinguish these behaviors from those that are merely pushy or attention seeking. Clients can learn to carefully test and determine whether the response is appropriate in the specific context. If the dog leans against you simply to get attention, you should be able to physically move the dog without the dog becoming aggressive. Clients can learn to look for more subtle cues. Dogs that lean on you to be close or for attention do not stiffen, open their eyes, and then move so that they are again touching or pressing on you- most dominantly aggressive dogs do. Dogs that are seeking closeness usually respond to verbal cues to get off or down and then use solicitous behavior (turning their head on their side, rolling over, whining, wagging their tail, putting their ears loosely back, and so on). Dogs with dominance aggression may "talk back," become stiffer, or become aggressive. Caution is urged.

Not all household members may be equally victimized by dominantly aggressive dogs. Young children are often perceived as a threat by some dogs because the children are at the same eye level as the dogs and their staring is perceived by the dog as a threat. The more compliant person in the household may be victimized more frequently than the person who is firm with the dog because the dog is sure of its position relative to the person who sets rules but is only sufficiently confident to push around someone who is not confident. Conversely, some dominantly aggressive dogs know that they can push compliant people and thus do not challenge them. Instead they challenge the person who is more forceful. Dominance aggression is a highly variable condition. Any dog that is aggressive for any reason can be potentially dangerous. Every year dogs kill people. The first rule in treating aggressive dogs must be to take all precautions to ensure people's safety. These same precautions will also keep the dog safe.

Before discussing specific instructions pertaining to dominantly aggressive dogs, it is necessary to address one final area of confusion. Many people confuse dominance with dominance aggression. A dog can be dominant without being dominantly aggressive. Dominant dogs can be pushy, can talk back, can snort at people, but are never aggressive in the listed contexts. They are pushy. There is no evidence that pushy puppies will become the dominant dogs in a household grouping of dogs, and there is no evidence that pushy dogs become dominantly aggressive. By definition, dominance aggression is a manifestation of inappropriate, out-of-context responses to specific situations related to control. Pushiness or dominance is a personality style. In fact, many people prefer pushy or dominant dogs because they work well in obedience situations and because some people believe that these dogs are "personality plus." Regardless, they should never be inappropriately aggressive.

Finally, dominance aggression usually develops at social maturity. This generally occurs between 18 and 36 months of age in dogs, although it can occur later or earlier and still be normal. This explains why your dog may be perfectly normal as a puppy and then at about 2 years of age seem to suddenly change. Although the majority of dominantly aggressive dogs are male, this condition is not controlled by hormone, although the presence of testosterone may exacerbate the aggression. The fact that dominance aggression occurs at social maturity is another hint that clients did not "cause" the problem. Some female puppies that exhibit true dominance aggression are very young (8-24 weeks); these dogs may have been exposed to androgen in utero. Although they represent an exception to the social maturity rule, these dogs still respond to behavior modification.

Finally, recent evidence indicates that many dogs exhibit dominance aggression because they are unsure of their role in the social hierarchy. Aggression in such situations may have its roots in anxiety. It is critical that the treatment of the aggression focuses on decreasing anxiety. A fair, enforceable rule structure will accomplish this without resorting to the physical violence or attempting to be solicitous and will reassure the dog.

The key to treating all aggressive dogs, especially dominantly aggressive dogs, is to avoid all the circumstances in which the dogs might be provoked to react inappropriately. This means that you must be a good observer of your dog. If your dog growls whenever you stare at it, do not stare. This instruction is in conflict with instructions commonly found in training manuals, but consider the following logic. You are asking the dog to respond to your challenge (the stare) with a challenge. An anxious dog will only become more anxious if you pursue the threat. The behavior here is truly abnormal: the dog cannot back down from a threat. If you do so, you put yourself at risk for intensification of your dog's aggression. You are not giving in to the dog; you are avoiding a circumstance in which the dog might manipulate you and in which its anxiety can only intensify. As you progress through the protocols and Tiers 1 and 2 of the behavior modification problems, you will gradually teach the dog that it must defer to you to get any attention (These handouts can be requested from our staff). These rules also lessen the dog's

anxiety. Later, you will desensitize the dog to situations in which it responds inappropriately. You cannot do all of this simultaneously. Remember, every time a dog has an inappropriate response, three things happen:

1. The dog learns from it and learns your weaknesses and fears (dogs read nonverbal communication well, probably better than you do).
2. You reinforce the inappropriate behavior simply because it continues to happen.
3. The dog backslides because it is upset and made more anxious by an aggressive event.

Most dogs act as if they find the circumstance of their exhibition of aggression traumatic; they realize that something untoward happened but cannot escape it. Remember, these dogs do not disobey simply to disobey you; they are behaving this way because they are abnormal and need help.

The safest strategy in dealing with any aggressive dog, particularly one that is dominantly aggressive, is to give the dog attention only when it defers to you. This simple rule is generalizable to every situation in which the dog can ever find itself and will help enforce the types of behavior that not only help the dog, but also that you desire.

Checklist:

1. Do not reach for the dog or the dog's collar or pull its legs. First, have the dog sit and stay, then you can push a leash or preferably a Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar on the dog. The Gentle Leader/Promise Collar System Canine Head Collar allows you to close the dog's mouth if it becomes aggressive. This keeps you safe and stops the dog from intensifying the aggression when the dog can best learn from it. If you cannot reach over the dog without eliciting an aggressive event, use a lasso-type leash to walk the dog.
2. Do not disturb the dog while it is resting, sleeping, or lying in front of a door or on the sofa or bed. Do not walk over the dog. Always ask the dog to come to you and then to sit and stay. Make sure that you do not shove the dog from a sofa or bed or push it away if it paws at you or pushes on you. Always give the dog warning of your intentions and then ask the dog to come and sit and stay for any attention.
4. If the dog scratches at or jumps on you or others, do not push or shove the dog down. Instead, turn away, fold your arms, and slough the dog off.
3. If necessary, walk the dog only on a head collar. Warn your neighbors that it is not a muzzle but that the dog is undergoing behavior modification. Ask them to help you help the dog.
5. Do not play aggressively with the dog (slapping at it or wrestling). Play only with toys. You can greet the dog with a soft sock toy and play tug only if you start the game with the dog sitting, you ask the dog to take the toy, the dog takes the toy only on command, the dog relinquishes the toy when requested, and ...you always win the game. If you cannot do it all of these facets exactly, do not play tug with the dog—you are setting it up to fail.
4. Do not let the dog sleep on your bed. You may not even be able to let the dog sleep in your bedroom. This minimizes the potential for an inadvertent threat when you are sleepy and least able to anticipate problem behavior. The key is to set the dog up to succeed not fail.
6. Feeding time may be a reactive situation. Many dogs with food-related aggression also have dominance aggression. If necessary, feed the animal in a separate room with the door open to avoid any aggressive incidents. If you have small children, you should be able to lock the door. If you give the dog table scraps, all scraps should be placed in the dog's dish. The dog should not be allowed to beg at the table and must sit and wait before approaching its dish. Do not feed the dog from the table if it becomes aggressive around food because this creates a potentially explosive and difficult-to-control situation.
5. Do not physically punish the dog. No exceptions. You will always lose because the dog will become more anxious and aggressive. If the dog growls or lunges, tell the dog "no" and disrupt the situation. You can do this by asking the dog to come into another room and sit or by leaving the dog. If the dog is wearing a head collar, pull the collar shut and say, "no," then quickly lead the dog away from the inciting event. If it is necessary to remove the dog from the room or from a situation, wait for the dog to become calm, then

practice a few of the sitting and staying exercise so that it realizes it must act appropriately to get "good" attention. Remember, try to avoid any aggressive events.

7. Warn your friends and neighbors that any aggressive dog can be potentially dangerous and that they must comply with your instructions to minimize danger to the dog and to themselves. If needed, when people visit have the dog in another room and introduce it only on the Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar and only when everything has become quiet. If you cannot do this, the dog may not mingle.
6. If the dog continues to bark, growl, or ignore you in any circumstances and returning to an exercise or task that the dog knows well still does not work, abandon the dog or sequester it in another room. Banishment is the most potent form of correction that you can use because it removes the dog's ability to control any part of the situation. These dogs are usually anxious and rely on the constant interaction and manipulation to reassure themselves. Removing that option and replacing it with a consistent rule structure that helps the animal relax can be the first step to teaching a more appropriate behavior.
7. Once the dog is controlled with two tiers of the behavior modification protocols and the techniques discussed previously, it is important to continue to reinforce the appropriate behavior in the dog for the rest of its life.

Lapses invariably result in regression. This is because the dogs need reassurance. **Aggression is not cured, but is can be controlled.** Dominantly aggressive dogs are not normal, but they can learn to behave normally.

Antianxiety medications may help some dogs that otherwise are unable to succeed in this program. Remember, if it is decided that medication could benefit your dog, you need to use it in addition to the behavior modification, not instead of it.

Finally, if you are not having success with the above information we recommend finding a trainer that deals with aggressive dogs using positive reinforcement. Please speak with a doctor for a recommendation.