

Aggression in Dogs

Given particular circumstances, any dog has the capacity to be aggressive.

This is a topic that needs to be well understood, by everyone who owns or intends to obtain a dog. All dogs have the capacity to be aggressive given particular circumstances. Just like its owner, a dog's personality is a product of nature and nurture.

Aggression is one of many behavioural traits displayed by dogs. The likelihood of a dog biting is dependent on many factors, including:

- genetic predisposition - some breeds have been developed to be more aggressive than others;
- temperament of the parents - just like humans, a dog's temperament is partially inherited from its parents;
- early experiences - if a puppy learns to play properly with humans and other animals, it is less likely to be fearful or aggressive as an adult dog;
- prior learning - if a certain situation is associated with bad experiences, the dog is more likely to react. For example if a dog has had bad experiences with children, it is more likely to be aggressive towards children;
- the situation at the time - if threatened or protective of something that is important to the dog, it is more likely to react aggressively.

This individual variation applies to many characteristics of dogs, such as fearfulness, ease of training and tendency to bark, to name a few. The inherited predisposition of the dog to be aggressive combined with past experiences and the present situation will determine how aggressively it will respond.

Some dogs may only be aggressive under certain circumstances, for example when protecting their territory, food or family.

Some dogs with a genetic predisposition towards aggression may never display such behaviour if the circumstances triggering such a response do not occur. Similarly, a dog that is genetically disposed to calmness, may become extremely aggressive if past experiences and the current situation are sufficiently hostile. All behavior is a combination of genetics, learning and a response to what is happening at any given time.

All this makes assessment of a dog's temperament very difficult because the circumstances that may evoke an aggressive response may not be easy to replicate. Some dogs are clearly aggressive but, for others, it may be impossible to know the triggers that will cause them to become aggressive.

The best way to minimize unwanted aggression in dogs is to address each of the factors involved; namely:

- genetic predisposition - choose a breed of dog that is appropriate to the situation in which it will live;
- temperament of the parents - if possible, see the parents before purchasing a puppy;
- early experiences - ensure that puppies meet other dogs and people and that these interactions are always positive;
- prior learning - as much as possible, make sure that interaction with people and other dogs is always a positive experience, and reward the dog for good behavior.
- the situation at the time - avoid placing a dog in a situation in which the animal is likely to become aggressive.

Sometimes, these factors are beyond the control of the owner, for example if an adult dog is obtained, the new owner will not know what experiences it had as a puppy. Fortunately it is possible to "teach an old dog new tricks" but it does take time and patience. Above all, recognize that any dog can bite in particular circumstances.