

How to Help an Aggressive Dog

Knowing the cause of your dog's behavior problem is key to correcting it.

Lloyd Resnick

Dominance is not the only trigger for biting. "In general, dogs bite to assert themselves in situations over which they feel the need for control," Dodman says. Consequently, before taking remedial action, owners must examine the context of the dog's behavior. This sometimes requires the help of a dog trainer or behaviorist. In rare cases, intractable aggression may be rooted in organic brain disease, systemic ailments, or plain irresponsible breeding, such as when two dominant-aggressive dogs are bred indiscriminately with one another. A dog conditioned to be aggressive is difficult to retrain. Sometimes euthanasia is the most humane option.

Fear of people (often uniformed), places (such as veterinary clinics), and situations (such as being cornered) can also incite biting. To modify the aggressive behavior of fearful dogs, many behaviorists recommend desensitization. It teaches a dog to be less reactive to a bite-provoking stimulus through low, gradually increasing levels of exposure to it. Desensitization works best when combined with what behaviorists call counter-conditioning, where the dog is rewarded for remaining calm during the retraining process. Thus, the dog learns to expect pleasure amid a situation that once triggered fear and aggression.

Dogs that chase and assault passersby are often set off by predatory drives. Instead of seeing an innocent jogger or cyclist, a predatory dog sees prey on the run. Often the simplest solution is to confine the dog to your property. Any dog running at large is an accident waiting to happen, but the stakes are much higher when the roaming canine is prone to aggression.

Unfortunately, predatory dog behavior is nearly impossible to "train out" because the instinct is hard-wired. Dodman recommends channeling predatory energy into harmless activities, such as fetching balls or Frisbees, swimming and agility practice.

A daily 20- to 30-minute aerobic workout, such as running off leash in a safe, closed-in area, often complements training when treating any type of aggression. Additionally, Dodman recommends adjusting an aggressive dog's diet to suit its activity level and avoiding nutritional surpluses, such as excess calories, that might fuel aggression.

Miller practiced the positively reinforced "work for a living" approach with Murphy every day for the rest of his life. Murphy had a 10-year no-biting streak when he died last year. But Miller stresses that owners of "reformed" biters can never become complacent. "I never considered Murphy 'cured' or 100-percent trustworthy," she says. "But the years of loyal companionship and fun more than made up for the extra attention he required."