

## How to Help an Aggressive Dog

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

*Lloyd Resnick*

Soon after Karen Miller adopted Murphy, a burly 7-month-old hound mix, from a shelter, she knew she had a problem. Murphy tried to bite her every time she bent over him, attempted to move him off the couch or got too close to him while walking down a narrow hallway.

"At first, I was afraid to go to sleep with Murphy around," Miller says. But enamored with his many agreeable characteristics, she embarked on a comprehensive canine rehabilitation program.

Without owners like Miller willing to uncover aggression's cause and curb the behavior, many dogs who bite do not get a second chance. They are euthanized. "Half of the dogs born in this country don't live to see their second birthday," says Nicholas Dodman, DVM, director of the Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, and author of "Dogs Behaving Badly" (Bantam). "Aggression is the No. 1 behavioral reason for that."

By immersing herself in dog-behavior literature, particularly Dodman's book, Miller learned Murphy's behavior was textbook dominance aggression. He reacted to any gesture or posture he interpreted as a threat to his self-appointed top-dog status. Even a pat on the head, which people universally intend as an expression of affection, set him off. Knowing punishment would only make matters worse, she implemented non-punitive solutions with great success.

First Miller gave Murphy gainful employment. Whenever he completed a "job" such as sitting or coming when called, he earned a reward, usually voluble praise and play. "I proved to Murphy that he'd have a great life if he did simple things for me," she says.

Miller, now a professional dog trainer, also manipulated the dog's environment in ways that limited the potential for conflicts of will. For example, instead of scolding him for sticking his snout into the garbage, she denied the dog access by locking the lid on the trashcan. Because Murphy was aggressively possessive about toys, Miller didn't leave any lying around.

Perhaps most important, she ignored rather than punished Murphy's dominance displays. When Murphy jumped up on her — a common canine expression of dominance — Miller turned and walked away rather than trying to push off the 80-pound dog. Reacting to a highly dominant dog's misbehavior with verbal or physical force usually escalates the dog's aggressive behavior.