

FACTS ABOUT DOG AGGRESSION

Incorrect things I hear people say....

Incorrect - You “don’t fight violence with violence. You should *talk nice* when your dog is growling or snapping to *reassure* him.”

FACT – “Talking nice” when your dog is being aggressive is *not* a good idea. Talking nice is praise to a dog. We praise the dog when he is doing a behavior we want to encourage. To use praise to ‘reassure’ the dog is twisted thinking (as far as dogs are concerned). *If you praise while the dog is growling, snapping, or biting you are actually encouraging the dog to be aggressive.* What you *should* do is give a firm physical correction via the leash and a slip type training collar (if possible) and tell the dog in a no-nonsense tone to “knock it off”.

Have you ever seen a mother dog correct her puppies? She is the pack leader. What does she do? She gives a warning with a no-nonsense look and/or growls in a firm tone. If she has to she immediately gives a little nip. She may also tell the other dog off and then firmly clamp down on the offender’s muzzle. She will hold the muzzle shut briefly until the other dog submits completely. Her puppies understand what she is communicating. It is firm and fair and swift. Once the puppy submits/quits, all is forgiven. There is no gray area. No wishy-washy half hearted correction. There is nothing to confuse them about what is acceptable and what isn’t. Mother dog certainly does *not* reward naughty behavior with sweet talk or treats.

In addition to correcting the dog for being aggressive you need to train and socialize him better. Training a dog is best done from a variety of angles with a *combination of both positive and negative reinforcement.* A well-rounded approach works extremely well with dogs and is overall pretty reliable. It’s much more reliable than solely relying on treats which some people simply use to bribe a dog. A combination of positive (praise and treats) and negative (verbal and/or physical correction used at just the right level for the dog in question) is also better than correction alone which is overall very unfair. Being jerked around all the time for anything and everything is a tough way to learn. Being corrected when you’re wrong and never rewarded when you are right isn’t in the least bit motivating. Would you be happy to work without pay? How would you know which behaviors to repeat if they were never rewarded or the pay was so low as to not inspire you?

Dogs need to be trained, (both corrected and positively rewarded), socialized, and helped to understand what is acceptable or not. Treats can be a big help as long as they are used properly and in combination with training and socialization (and your dog isn’t too nervous or worried to eat them). If the dog is growling at people unnecessarily he needs to be corrected and he probably also needs to be introduced to more friendly strangers and be fed treats by them for a while.

You may also need to learn to manage your dog differently. Is your dog reacting aggressively because a strange dog is shoving his nose up his rear end or sticking his nose in his face? Not all dogs like that kind of thing from dogs they don’t know. This does not mean your dog has a bad temperament or that he doesn’t like other dogs or won’t eventually learn to like this particular other dog. It just means he is more reserved about strange animals being pushy and getting in his personal space. He may just need a little more time to get to know the other dog and need for the stranger to be less pushy about getting in his face. If you are in tight quarters like a vet’s office or training class, you may need to run interference by removing yourself from close proximity and/or politely ask the offender to back off. (Just say your dog has ‘space’ issues). Your dog may

be growling because he is afraid of the overly friendly or obnoxious strange dog trying to be too familiar with him. He is trying to more or less politely warn the stranger he doesn't want him in his personal space. If the other dog doesn't heed the growl because he is either clueless or doesn't care, then it can escalate into a snap. It's your job to run interference. Correct your dog if he reacts aggressively but also make sure strange dogs stay out of your dog's personal space. Also do not allow any intense staring between the two dogs. (Staring is a challenge in doggy language. It may be to play or it may be a challenge to fight depending on the dogs in question).

I have seen people with overly 'friendly' dogs claiming their dog just wants to say 'hi'. In reality sometimes the 'friendly' dog is using this as a way to come up and push the other dog around. Shoving his head over the top of a frightened or unwilling dog's shoulders is a way to dominate him. Basically the overly social/friendly dog is terrorizing, bullying, and/or molesting the other dog. Grossly unfair! If both dogs are agreeable to the meeting, then that's fine. They can make friends and have a great time playing. I am all for fun and socialization. In reality, not all dogs are extreme extroverts who love to be slobbered on by all other dogs or are immediately sure of themselves with all new comers. If the overly friendly strange dog really just wanted to play with a scared dog he would react more submissively once he saw a frightened or aggressive reaction. He certainly would not continue to scare or push the other dog.

This is why people come to our obedience classes. To learn about dog behavior and why dogs act the way they do and what to do to make things better for their dogs. They come to learn how to be in charge, teach what is acceptable or not acceptable, and to train and socialize their dogs.

Our training philosophy is one of common sense and balance. We also believe all dogs should accept being handled by their owners, vet, and/or groomer. They should accept being in the presence of other well-behaved dogs and people who are minding their own business.

Back to the aggression issues...

Incorrect - You should "ignore your puppy when he bites you". (Even when he has his teeth sunk in to your clothing or body?!)

FACT – Ignoring a puppy when he bites you *may* work, especially if he has a very soft temperament. Personally, I don't have the patience or tolerance to be bitten. For some people though, this may be worth a try *briefly*. The reason is that it can work with some puppies when they are very young, when they are still in the whelping box. When young litter mates play they are learning how hard to bite or how rough they can be. If they bite too hard the other puppy may cry out and then go off and sulk, refusing to play. The game is over and there is no more fun. Sometimes the lesson is learned and that's all it takes. Frequently though, the other puppy has to sound off and bite back before the bully will quit. The lesson here is that you can start with an offended cry and walk away to see if it cures the problem. If it doesn't immediately produce results you need to go to a competent professional and learn a proper physical correction (also see our information sheet on puppy biting). Unless, that is, you want to end up being a human pin cushion.

Here's something else to think about. If you take a puppy away from his mother and litter mates too early he will not learn as much as he should from them about how to temper his bites. A puppy under 6 weeks of age is too young to leave his litter mates and dam. Puppies should be at least 7 to 8 weeks old before they go to a new home.

Incorrect – You should "play tug of war to take out the dog's aggression."

FACT – The way most owners play tug of war actually *encourages* their dogs to be aggressive towards them. It also builds the dog up to fight against their owners. Every time the dog yanks the toy away he wins and you lose. The dog fights you and he wins over and over. This is *not* a game to play with an aggressive dog or one who thinks he is in charge. (BTW, a version of tug of war is one of the things professionals do to *increase* the aggression and/or confidence in attack trained protection dogs).

Another thing you should *not* do is rough house with your dog. Rough housing teaches a dog to bite at his owner. It always amazes me to hear that an owner will even go to the length of putting on heavy clothing and thick gloves to play rough with his dog. Then as the dog grows up and quite naturally bites his owner without the protective gear on, the person wonders where the dog learned such awful behavior. DUH! Rough housing and wrestling are definitely on the *do not do* list.

Incorrect – You should “distract your dog with a treat” when he acts aggressive towards another dog.

FACT – Feeding your dog a treat may very well *distract* him *temporarily*. What you may actually be doing, though, is rewarding him for being aggressive. Giving treats to your dog when he is actively engaging in inappropriate behavior is *not* the best answer.

CURING OR CONTROLLING AGGRESSION

It is so much easier to raise a well-behaved dog that does not bite you if you get into formal training early on. *You need to learn the signs of aggression and how to correct them! The longer a bad habit is allowed to go on, the more difficult it will be to retrain.*

If you are having trouble with your dog blatantly disobeying or even snapping or biting at you, you are not the pack leader. The longer you wait to address the problem properly, the more difficult it will be to get your dog under control. Please do NOT wait until your dog is a year old, or has actually bitten someone before you decide to get help.

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