

Canine Temperament

Part VI

Protective aggression

Dogs can become protective of their owners, their home, the car, and many other things. Many owners, without realising it allow their dogs to become too protective, and others even encourage it. Protection is all right up to a point and where it is warranted, but apart from that it can be very dangerous. It is often promoted when owners get too close to their dogs even to the point of holding them on very short leads, bending down to them, yelling down their ears, cuddling them as they sit or lie down with them on the grass. When owners are in this position their dogs tend to protect them just as they would their own off spring.

When clients telephone me for an appointment and tell me that their dog has an aggression problem, I always ask where the dog sleeps at night. I always have a very good idea as to what their answers will be. In the vast majority of cases they tell me that the dogs sleep in the bedroom, and worse still most will openly or sheepishly admit that the dog sleeps on the bed.

One of the worst cases I can recall happened three years ago. Two young brothers aged 10 and 12 were given two small dogs by their parents as Christmas presents. The parents told their boys that they would be responsible for the dogs' training. So they brought them to me for that purpose. The older boy's dog had so much protective aggression it was positively dangerous. I could not get near it. The other dog was not so bad, but I had to be extremely careful how I handled it. With anyone else it was likely to suddenly attack. Where did the dogs sleep? They slept not just in the boys' rooms, but actually in the beds with them. No wonder they had protective aggression. The boys had a very domineering father. There was much tension in the home. Their mother, realising they had a problem on their hands, expected me to wave the magic wand to cure the trouble. I explained in very simple terms how and why both dogs had developed protective aggression. But I felt that what I said fell on deaf ears. They were only prepared to listen to what they wanted to hear. After three lessons I never heard from them again. Hopefully, they would have got the message and had the dogs put down because they were so dangerous.

Apprehensive aggression

Dogs that have this trait are commonly called 'fear biters'. They are either nervous or suspicious (explained in my article IV January 2009) and they also exhibit either pure or protective aggression. So there are four types under this heading. They are likely to bite, but only when frightened or cornered. When and if they bite, it is usually a very quick nip and they will immediately back off. If the nervousness or suspiciousness in a dog can be overcome with very gentle handling, whereby the dog becomes more confident, the aggressive part of the trait can in some cases gradually disappear. But one can expect all this to take time. I remember a particular Kelpie cross which had become traumatised by having its claws clipped. During the many weeks of obedience training, during which it became more and more confident and trusting, I spent time in every lesson carefully handling its paws, then its nails and letting it see the nail clippers in my other hand as I talked to it with re-assuring praise. Eventually, I was able to clip its claws using quiet praise all the

time. The owner asked me if I would like her to hold her dog while I did this. I thanked her, but declined her offer. I explained that too many hands on a dog can make a dog more suspicious and subsequently it would pull away and possibly bite.

Rare types of aggression

It must always be remembered that when a dog is in shock, it is highly likely to bite you, and bite hard. You can't blame it. When I lived in England there was a very friendly Afghan, which I had known for two years, in the dog training club. One evening it jumped rather awkwardly down off the stage in the village hall where we trained. It looked as if it had just ricked its paw and it lay there crying on the floor. I went over to look and it immediately grabbed hold of my foot. In order to get it off my foot I had to take hold of its jaws and as I did so it grabbed my right hand. The immediate pain was agonising. I then had to get my left hand into its mouth and pull its jaws sufficiently apart to release my hand. It all happened so quickly. As soon as it grabbed me, I knew that the poor dog was in shock, and as I stepped away I warned everyone to stand clear. Later, it was carefully lassoed with two leashes and held between two handlers until the vet arrived to give it a shot to put it out. He then took the injured dog back to his surgery and successfully operated on its front leg, which had broken when it fell. At the same time I was taken to hospital where I received a number of stitches in my right hand, which had been punctured in 16 places. Ah, well, I guess it's an occupational hazard, but wherever possible you should try to prevent or avoid such incidents. Weeks later we met again and the dog was so pleased to see me.

In 1952 I attended a very interesting lecture given by a vet who told us how a dog followed his master to the railway station some kilometres south of London. The man boarded the train and as it pulled out the man expected, as usual, that his dog would return home. But this time the dog decided to pursue the train which accelerated at great speed. As the dog ran alongside the railway track he tragically touched the live rail. A signalman in a nearby signal box saw what happened and telephoned the station. Later, a porter with shovel in hand walked down the track to where the dog's body was lying. He dug a grave in the embankment and as he picked the dog up to bury him, the dog bit him and ran off up the track and home again. That is how a dog can be affected by an electric shock. He lay there supposedly dead until the porter attempted to move him. That was a lucky dog which lived to tell the tale, but another reason why I tell this story is to make dog owners more aware of their responsibilities, by ensuring that their dogs cannot get out and follow them to work or wherever they might go.

Other forms of aggression can be caused by something internal. Let me give you three examples. A two-year-old Border Collie started to show aggression towards other dogs. The aggression became more frequent. Eventually, it was responsibly put down. A post mortem revealed that the dog had a tumour on the brain. A racing Greyhound showed aggression towards some dogs on some days. There was no pattern to it. The cause of the aggression was a mystery. It was withdrawn from racing. Two years later it died. The veterinarian who carried out a post mortem revealed that it had an odd twist in its intestine and strongly believed it had been born with it. It was one of those problems which could flare up from time to time, hence the unexpected aggressive incidents. A German Shepherd guide dog developed animal aggression six months after it was spayed. An exploratory

operation found that, by an unfortunate mistake, a non-dissolvable suture had been left inside irritating internal organs. When removed, the guide dog returned to work never to show aggression again.

Jealousy

This is not a common trait, but it is one which you should watch for carefully when handling more than one dog at the same time. It can soon lead to aggression. Often it is the result of the master fondling one dog more than the other.

Just before I immigrated to Australia, a friend of mine, who was one of the best dog trainers in the UK, owned two smooth-coat Border Collies. Out of the same litter, they were brilliant workers. When they were about two years old, his wife died. Naturally, my friend was in a state of grief for some time during which his two dogs became so jealous over him and fought. Therefore, he had to keep them apart. It became such a great strain on my friend that he made the right decision in re-housing one of them with a close friend and the problem was solved. More on temperament next month! Cheers!