

Know the Signs

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How do you tell if your dog's behavior may pose a risk and liability to you, your family, and others who may come in contact with it? How strongly does a dog's breed factor into the potential for aggressive behavior? How does our behavior become a factor for dogs behaving aggressively? What are the indicators that we should seek help? What help is available? Every dog has the potential to behave aggressively depending on the situation. Knowing the answers to these questions can help prevent aggressive incidents that may result in physical, emotional and mental injury.

Your first sign of trouble may well be your "gut" feeling. If anything about your dog's behavior makes you feel uncomfortable, causes your heart rate to rise, or makes you hold your breath, you need to seek help to understand your response. Our bodies are hard-wired to respond to danger before our conscious brain is aware that there's a problem. Don't ignore this very important survival mechanism.

Next, you'll want to observe your dog. Dogs who are aloof and shake off (although not wet) after you touch them do not welcome social contact and may bite if forced to interact. Dogs that forcefully jump upon or against you, and dogs that attempt to mount, or put their mouth on you when you touch them, are sending signals that their intentions are confrontational and not social. Dogs who stiffen momentarily in response to eye contact, touching, or when you are close to an object they value, such as a dish of food, toy, or another person, are signaling you that they do not welcome your interference and may bite if you ignore their signals. Body language you should specifically watch for includes direct and hard eye contact, base of tail elevated above the level of the dog's back, muzzle puckered, whiskers forward, and hackles up. Growling is a warning which should never be ignored.

How strongly does a dog's breed factor into the potential for aggressive behavior? Pitbulls can be cream puffs and Golden Retrievers can be Godzilla! The behaviors that we see depend on the individual's genetics and the environment in which it was raised from the moment of conception, and perhaps back through earlier generations. Singleton puppies (those who have no littermates) and pups taken from their mothers and litters before the age of 49 days may not learn appropriate social skills, are often easily frustrated, and may bite hard with little provocation. Competent rescues and breeders evaluate the behavior of each pup prior to putting it up for adoption. If this has not been done, ask why. If purchasing a purebred dog, always ask to see the mother and father. If these animals are less than social and friendly, reconsider buying a pup from that mating. Always be sure of the source of the puppy you intend to buy, do your research on breed characteristics, and test the pup yourself before purchasing. Information on puppy testing can be found at http://www.workingdogs.com/testing_volhard.htm.

How does *our* behavior become a factor for dogs behaving aggressively? Failure to enroll a puppy in a positive methods puppy class is a major contributor to the onset of later behavior problems. Failure to set boundaries for, and consistently reinforce, good behavior is also fertile ground for the growth of behavior problems. Most dogs don't just "know" how to live among humans; they need us to teach them what works and what doesn't. Basic Manners classes are a great way to teach boundaries and a reward system. Another excellent source for helping dogs learn the skills they need to live successfully with humans can be found at <http://www.dogstardaily.com/free-downloads>.

What are the indicators that we should seek help? What help is available? As earlier mentioned, pay attention to that gut feeling that all is not well, particularly where children are involved. If you notice any of the above signs of unsocial or aggressive behavior, contact a trainer, behaviorist, or

veterinarian who is qualified to work with aggression issues. A good source for these professional is the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <http://iaabc.org/>.

Being proactive and discriminating about where you obtain a dog, and calling for help at the first sign of trouble, will increase your chances of fixing a problem behavior before it causes serious harm. Our Behavior Department is happy to answer any questions you may have. They can be reached at 262-542-8851, Ext. 204, or clauddeen@hawspets.org.