

# Biting vs. Aggression

Is it aggression when a dog bites? Or is it just a sign that training is needed?

A dog bite is a scary thing. It's never good when a dog's teeth come in contact with a person's skin. And though it's understandable that you're scared and angry, it helps to understand why your dog acted this way.

Was your dog asleep and your child jumped on him? Was your dog trying to tell you to stay off of "her" couch? Was your dog terrified of something and bit you when you tried to comfort him? Was your dog guarding his food or toy? Did you get bitten when trying to separate two dogs? Each one of these situations causes a different reaction and provides a different reason for the bite, but true aggression is not one of them.

## Instinct

Your dog is sleeping in his favorite spot and your child wants to snuggle. Your son plops himself down on the bed next to Rover and hugs him. Your dog's instinct is to wake up fighting. He has no idea what is happening, regardless if it's happened before. Imagine being woken up by your accountant crawling into bed with you. You'd be shocked, scared, surprised, angry, confused, stunned - all in the matter of a few seconds. Similarly, your dog is feeling the same emotions and reacts instinctively. This is not aggressiveness, this is a dog being surprised while sleeping.

## Possession

Your dog is on the couch, watching her favorite show. You come in and sit down next to her and she growls at you. When you go to pet her to calm her down, she nips you. Dogs use their mouths to make corrections. She's telling you that you're not allowed to sit on the couch, and when you try and snuggle up to her, she isn't having it. She's correcting you by tagging you. Tagging is when a dog hits and pinches you with their teeth. Sometimes their mouths are open, sometimes they're not. Dogs tag each other to provide corrections. In your dog's mind, you did something wrong and she needs to let you know. This can be a form of resource guarding and through training your dog's actions can be modified.

## Guarding

Your dog is eating and you walk by. Your dog growls and lunges at you. We call this resource guarding, and is fairly common, especially in dogs that had to fight for food from littermates or competitors. Dogs guard resources such as food, water, high value treats, toys, wood chips, people, etc.. For some reason, your dog feels that they have to stop you from taking their resource away. A dog that guards can be retrained to allow these resources to be removed or replaced.

## Fear

Dogs, when they feel threatened or in danger, will lash out to protect themselves. We might think that putting a dog in a bathtub for a bath is something trivial, but to a dog who has never been bathed or who is afraid of water, this is a life threatening act. They want to prevent getting into this situation at all costs. Fear is something that, through training, can be mitigated. A dog can be desensitized to things that cause fear and reactivity.

## Reactivity

Was your dog barking or lunging at another dog and then suddenly turned and bit you? This is frustration on your dog's part, and he's taking that frustration out on you. As with fear, training helps a reactive dog learn to deal with the frustration that is causing them to be reactive. Dogs are reactive for a number of reasons, but mostly because they're afraid. Helping a dog realize that they're safe, giving them the confidence to deal with the scary object and giving them options are ways to train reactive dogs.

## Protection

Your dog is a member of the pack. You are a member of the pack. When your dog believes that your pack is threatened, she might feel the need to protect the pack. That means you. She could be protecting you from your husband as he tickles you, your mother as she hugs you or your big scary, hair brother when he comes into the house. Your dog doesn't know the difference between an axe murderer and your brother. As the person who leads the pack, you have to let your dog know that you'll take care of any interlopers and that you'll call on her when you need help.

## New People

This is kind of related to protection. When your dog meets a new person, unless you take control of the situation and introduce your dog correctly, it can be confusing. The person might smell of mothballs, or be 200 feet tall and wearing a hat. Or they might have some crazy energy that seems threatening. Your dog will take his cue from you, so if you're nervous because the new person in the house is your mother-in-law, your dog will be nervous and may try and help you out. Training your dog to meet new people prevents a lot of missteps from your dog.

Understanding why your dog acted the way he did makes the situation a little less scary. Most "aggression" is really a reaction or a response to something that occurred. It's rare for a dog to randomly become aggressive.

*Written by Sheila of Integral Dog Training in collaboration with Animal Rescue Konnection (c) 2022.*