

Dominance Aggression in Dogs

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Dominance aggression (social, competitive, owner-directed) involves threatening postures and behaviors directed toward family members or other familiar people by a dog that perceives itself to be more dominant than the person. It is particularly disturbing because the aggression seems to be unprovoked and unpredictable.

Use of the term *dominance aggression* has been questioned, because the concept of dominance in dogs has been widely misused; dominance aggression has been overdiagnosed; and there is concern that the terminology suggests the dog should be dominated to manage the aggression.

Causes

Dominance aggression has its roots in the social organization of wolves, the domestic dog's closest wild relative. Within the wolf pack, there is a social hierarchy in which the dominant individuals have first access to critical resources. Among domestic dogs, dominance threats and overt aggression are exhibited in the contexts of competition over "resources" or in response to challenges and dominance signals.

People frequently do not understand how a dominant dog interprets their actions and gestures, so, from the dog's perspective, people can be confusing and inconsistent. Lavishing gratuitous affection on the dog, giving in to its demands for attention, or even unintentionally mimicking canine submissive signals (such as kissing the dog on its face) are contradictory behaviors to expecting the dog to do what the owner wishes. Inconsistency and unpredictability in social interactions with family members can result in anxiety and instability in the dog's social relationships, which in turn can escalate social competition and dominance aggression.

Clinical Signs

The highest incidence of dominance aggression occurs in intact males, followed by castrated males, spayed females, and unspayed females. Purebred dogs, especially the English springer spaniel, Lhasa apso, cocker spaniels, Doberman pinscher, toy poodle, and terriers, have a higher incidence than other breeds. Onset typically occurs at 1-3 years of age. Onset may seem sudden, but early, subtle signs may not be recognized.

Diagnostic Tests

A complete medical history, physical examination, and comprehensive laboratory tests are recommended to look for possible medical factors that can contribute to or complicate management of the aggression.

The behavioral diagnosis of canine aggression is determined by context and the specific stimulus or trigger, the target, behavioral components, and the age, sex, and breed of the dog.

- *Context and triggers:* Aggression may occur when the dog's dominance has been challenged by a dominance signal (pet-

ting, hugging, staring at, standing over, commanding, scolding, punishing, or forcing the dog to do something) or when a family member "competes" for a "critical resource" (such as food or a prized object).

- *Target:* Dominance aggression is most often directed toward the dog's owners and other familiar people and may be preferentially directed to certain individuals.
- *Behavioral components:* Snarling, growling, lunging, snapping, biting, and assumption of a dominant posture (erect or stiff body, ears, and tail; raised hackles; direct stare) may occur. Some dogs exhibit varying degrees of both dominance and fear, indicating that there is some anxiety or ambivalence in the dog's motivation.

Treatment Options

Because of the dangerous and complex nature of dominance aggression, specific treatment by a professional with knowledge and experience in the management of canine aggression is advised. The following are only general recommendations:

- Human safety is the first consideration. It is particularly dangerous to keep these dogs in homes with children. *Young* children are especially at risk.
- The aggression triggers should be identified and avoided. Head halters and basket muzzles may help reduce biting risk, but they are not guaranteed to prevent injury. Physical punishment is dangerous and counterproductive.
- Castration of intact males reduces dominance aggression, but the benefit may not occur for several months. Spaying of intact females may increase aggression.
- Obedience training is important to develop commands that can be used in behavior modification programs. "Nothing in Life is Free," a nonconfrontational method that requires the dog to defer by obeying commands before every interaction (attention, food, petting, play), can lessen the dog's dominant position. Specific desensitization techniques can reduce the dog's reaction to certain aggression triggers.
- Changes should be made in the way the family interacts with the dog to alter the dog's perception of its status. Temporarily withdrawing attention from the dog, as well as changes in feeding routine, exercise schedule, and sleeping or resting sites, may be recommended.
- Serotonergic drugs and drugs that improve impulse control may be beneficial for some dogs.

Prognosis

Dominance aggression is rarely, if ever, cured. In many instances, the severity can be reduced, but when the potential for serious injury is great, euthanasia should be considered.