

Learning to be Aggressive

We've worked with a number of people who have taught their dogs, inadvertently, to be aggressive. It's happened because they didn't understand what their dogs were telling them or didn't respect their dogs' feelings or never gave their dog the education it needed and deserved.

One client, with a Chihuahua named Gizmo, wanted their friends to pet him. They would pick Gizmo up and hold him, and then they would tell their friends to come and pet him.

Gizmo, who actually is friendly when given a chance, didn't know these people, and wasn't given an opportunity to meet them on his terms. He was restrained and couldn't get away. Then people he didn't know would reach for him. With no opportunity to get away from this situation, which he was uncomfortable with, Gizmo started snapping at everyone who reached out towards him. He would even bite his owners during these circumstances in an effort to get away.

Dogs, and people, have instincts called Fight or Flight. Most of the time dogs, and people, will try to get away from situations that scare them or make them uncomfortable. But if we remove their ability to get away, they are only left with the option to fight.

What happened when Gizmo snapped at these people? They would pull their hand back, which is what Gizmo wanted. So the fight strategy worked. Once he saw that the strategy worked, he repeated it. The more times it worked the more ingrained that behavior became.

Another client with a Shih Tzu named Sally did something similar. When someone came to visit, Sally would be lead to the door on leash and forced to stay there as strangers were directed to feed her a treat. As is common for people, they bent towards her and thrust their hand towards her. Sally, like Gizmo, wasn't allowed to meet people on her terms and she couldn't get away.

Sally was scared by these giants looming over and reaching towards her. Like Gizmo, Sally started becoming reactive and because her growling and snapping caused the reaching hand to retreat, again the strategy worked and so was repeated.

Most likely in both of these situations if the owners had recognized their dogs' signals that they were uncomfortable and took Gizmo and Sally's feeling into consideration they would not have become aggressive and started biting.

We worked with a couple with a large shepherd mix named Spencer. They had never taught Spencer to come when called or follow their directions. As a result when they needed to either bring Spencer in from the back yard or to go into the shower for a bath they would go to him, grab his collar and pull him to where they wanted him.

Spencer at first would run from them as they approached, but sooner or later they would corner and grab him. Spencer started becoming more and more reactive. At first just growling as they approached, but when they continued to grab him, he started biting them.

Spencer was very affectionate and would snuggle with them and they could pet him, but only when he approached them, never if they approached him. He didn't trust their hands. He also actually liked baths, but he didn't like getting grabbed or pulled.

In all three of these situations, the aggression could have been prevented if the owners had understood the messages their dogs were giving, if they respected their dogs' feelings and had taken the time to teach their dog to respond to their instructions in a positive way.

There are always reasons that dogs do what they do. Aggression is almost always a learned behavior or strategy. It often takes a long time before a dog actually resorts to biting and most will try other tactics, such as trying to get away, before trying aggression.

In all three cases we were able to help but each one of these situations could very easily been avoided with understanding, respect and education. When people take the time to understand what their dogs are communicating to them and respect their dogs' feelings and needs the result will be . . . Happy Dogs = Happy Families

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