

DOMINANCE ISN'T USUALLY THE PROBLEM

By Pat Miller

I never cease to be amazed by the number of my clients who have been told elsewhere that their dog is exhibiting “dominance aggression,” when it’s clear as the nose at the end of their dog’s face that he’s reacting out of fear. Sure, status-related aggression (sometimes called dominance aggression) exists, but fear is a very strong motivator for aggressive behavior, and by far the most common type of aggression I see in my behavior practice.

Dogs frequently aggress from fear due to a lack of adequate early socialization. Socialization is the process of installing a positive world view in a puppy by exposing him to lots of different people, places and things, making sure he has good experiences with all those things. The most important socialization period is very early in a pup’s life – as young as 2 weeks through 12 to 14 weeks of age. While socialization is ongoing even after this, and remedial socialization can repair *some* of the damage done by lack of early socialization, if a solid foundation isn’t put in place during this critically important time, chances are good that the dog will be somewhat to significantly *neophobic* (fearful of new things) throughout his life.

Dogs can also become fearfully aggressive from bad experiences. A dog who is teased and tormented by humans may become aggressive in response, and may generalize his fear toward all humans, or toward the class of humans who abused him: children, men with beards, women wielding cleaning supplies, people in uniform... A dog who has been attacked by another dog, or had a bad experience with another species – cat, horse, cow – may become fearfully aggressive toward others of the species that frightened or injured him.

A fearful dog’s aggression begins as his natural response to whatever he perceives as threatening, and he becomes *classically conditioned* to have a negative association with that stimulus.

“Other dogs are bad – they hurt me.”

“Cleaning ladies are bad – they carry scary things.”

“Children are bad – they poke things in my ears and pull my tail.”

When the dog has a strong emotional response to these now-classically conditioned aversive stimuli, he may growl, bark and/or lunge, even bite at the person to protect himself. In most cases, when a dog growls, barks or lunges, the scary thing goes away, and over time the dog becomes operantly conditioned – that is, he learns that he can *make* scary things go away, and he *chooses* to offer these aggressive behaviors deliberately in order to make the scary people go away.

Negative reinforcement, one of the four principles of operant conditioning, says “The dog’s behavior makes a bad thing go away, and as a result, the behavior increases.” Therefore, when a dog’s aggressive behavior successfully makes scary people go away, his aggression is likely to increase. This one reason you may see an adolescent dog offer low levels of distance-increasing “go away” behavior that escalate as he realizes the

behavior works to make people go away. He has been reinforced for the behavior, so the behavior increases. What started as a natural, reflexive response (“Yikes! Go away, you scared me!”) becomes conditioned through association (“Oh, I don’t like people in uniforms – they are scary.”), and the dog learns to operantly control the scary things (“Oh, I can *make* people in uniform go away by growling and barking at them! I will do that faster, sooner and stronger the next time!”).

Modifying Fear-Related Aggression

There are three approaches to modifying fear-related aggression currently in popular use. None involve the application of verbal or physical punishment. While punishment *can* successfully suppress some signs of aggression, such as growling or snarling, it doesn’t change the dog’s association with the fear-causing stimulus. In fact, it likely makes the scary thing even *more* aversive, since its presence now turns the dog’s *human* violent. In addition, suppressing your dog’s warning signs takes away his ability to tell you he’s uncomfortable. His growl is a valuable communication that allows you to help him escape from situations and stimuli he can’t handle. Taking the growl away doesn’t change his emotional response to the presence of the aversive stimulus; it just suppresses his ability to communicate.

Counter Conditioning

My favorite approach to modifying fear aggression is counter conditioning and desensitization. This form of classical conditioning works to change your dog’s already-established association with an aversive stimulus from negative to positive by pairing it with something wonderful.

Perhaps your dog is fearful of and aggressive toward men, especially bearded men. Determine the distance your dog needs to be from a *beardless* man so he is aware of the man and a little concerned but not trying to retreat, growling, or doing anything else overtly aggressive. Have a man appear at that distance for a few seconds. When your dog notices, feed him tiny bits of a very high-value treat, such as chicken; baked, boiled or canned (rinsed and drained). Then have the man step behind a barrier such as a tree, or a doorway. Repeat, and as your dog gets happier about the chicken and less concerned about the man, have the man stay visible for longer periods of time. Pause every few seconds in your chicken feeding so your dog can look at the man again, then feed more chicken.

Your goal is to convince your dog that the man makes chicken happen. Gradually increase the intensity of stimulus by having the man stay visible longer, and by slowly decreasing the distance between the man and the dog (keep feeding!), until the man can walk past your dog without eliciting any signs of fear. Practice with lots of different men – some with beards, some without – in lots of different places, to convince your dog that all men make chicken happen. Find a location where men will pass by randomly at a sub-threshold distance and practice there, to avoid having to hire a man to work with you and your dog. When your dog is *consistently* happy about having men pass close by, start asking your men-friends to drop treats as they pass by, and eventually have them hand-feed treats to your dog.

Constructional Aggression Treatment (CAT)

Developed by behavior analysts Kellie Snyder and Dr. Jesus Rosales-Ruiz (University of North Texas) the CAT procedure utilizes operant conditioning (negative reinforcement)

rather than classical conditioning, by controlling the reinforcer for your dog's fear-related aggression. With CAT, have someone approach that your dog is likely to be fearful of.

When you see your dog begin to get tense, signal the person to halt. Remember, in the past your dog has been negatively reinforced for his aggression-related behaviors because they made the person go away. Watch your dog closely. As soon as you see some small sign that his tension has relaxed, even slightly, signal the person to turn and walk away, thus reinforcing your dog's behavior of *relaxing* to make the scary person go away. Repeat this with the person halting at that same spot each time, leaving at your signal when you see your dog relax, until he no longer tenses when the person approaches and stops. The next approach, have the person come one step closer, and repeat the process. Continue until the person can walk all the way up to your dog with no sign of tension or aggression. Ideally, you will see your dog become happy and excited, offering affiliative (social, distance-decreasing signals) as the person approaches. Because he has been reinforced for calm, relaxed or happy behavior to make the person leave, he *becomes* calm, happy and relaxed and no longer wants the person to leave.

Behavioral Adjustment Training (BAT)

The third approach, BAT, combines elements of both counter conditioning and CAT. A CAT procedure is initiated, but options include feeding treats, having the scary thing go away, and allowing the fearful dog to move away from the scary thing – all various ways of reinforcing and changing the dog's association with the scary person.

Practitioners of all three approaches report significant success with these methods. The piece that's consistent with all three is keeping the dog below threshold. There's no need for the dog to growl, snarl, bark, or lunge, because the scary thing stays far enough away he doesn't feel compelled to act aggressively to be safe.

Remember that aggression should not be taken lightly. If your dog acts aggressively, your best option is to contact a qualified, positive behavior professional to help you decide which approach is best for you and your dog, and to help you implement it. Be safe!

SIDEBAR: THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF OPERANT CONDITIONING

With operant conditioning, the dog behaves deliberately, to affect the consequence. Here are the four principles of operant conditioning, developed by behaviorist B.F. Skinner in the 1950s:

1. Positive Reinforcement: The dog's behavior makes a *good* thing *happen*, and his behavior increases. He gets a cookie when he sits, and over time he sits more often and more quickly in order to get more cookies. Positive reinforcement is the primary approach used in good operant training programs.
2. Positive Punishment: The dog's behavior makes a *bad* thing *happen*; his behavior decreases. Your dog jumps on you; you hold his paws and squeeze, until he struggles to get down. Over time, he jumps up less because he doesn't like having his paws held and squeezed. Note: This is not a recommended training technique – he can learn to associate your hands on his paws with discomfort, making other necessary handling procedures – such as nail trimming – also aversive. Positive punishment techniques are not generally recommended.
3. Negative Punishment: The dog's behavior makes a *good* thing *go away*; his behavior decreases. He jumps up to grab the ball from your hand, so you hide it behind your back (negative punishment for jumping up). He learns to not jump up because he

wants you to throw the ball, not hide it. When he sits, you throw the ball (positive reinforcement for sitting). Over time he jumps less and sits more in order to get you to throw the ball. Negative punishment is considered a generally appropriate and benign technique for training without the use of aversives.

4. Negative Reinforcement: The dog's behavior makes a *bad* thing *go away*; as a result the behavior increase. When the mail carrier pushes mail through the slot, your dog runs to the door to bark at the intruder, and the mail carrier goes away. Your dog thinks his barking makes the mail carrier go away; as a result his aggressive behavior at mail delivery time increases. Negative reinforcement has the potential to do harm if the aversive is presented at too great an intensity, but can be used well if care is taken to keep the aversive stimulus at below-threshold level, where the dog is aware of its presence but not overly stressed.

SIDEBAR: STATUS-RELATED v. FEAR-RELATED AGGRESSION

Status-related aggression (sometimes called dominance aggression) does exist – just in far fewer numbers than some would have you think. It commonly develops at social maturity, usually between 18 and 24 months, although the range can include 12 to 36 months. Growling, baring teeth, staring and biting are common behaviors in this presentation of aggression. The behaviors occur when a dog threatens humans for control by staring, teeth-baring or growling when asked to perform behaviors, by growling or biting when disturbed, and/or by aggressively objecting to verbal or physical punishment. Physical punishment, while not recommended for *any* form of aggression, is especially not recommended for this type of aggression, as the dog is highly likely to escalate the intensity of his own aggression in response to yours. This type of aggression is best modified by gently requiring deference behaviors from your dog through a Say Please program (where he sits to make all good things happen) and managing his environment to prevent confrontation.

In contrast, fear-related aggression is characterized by lowered head and body posture, tail-tucking, flattened ears, attempts to escape, snapping and biting if the person continues to approach, and sometimes urination and defecation. This type of aggression is best modified by giving your dog a new emotional association with people, and reinforcing behavioral response that are not aggressive, while managing his environment to prevent over-threshold exposure to fear-causing stimuli.

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