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Is My Dog Aggressive?

Aggression in dogs is a subject worthy of serious consideration and in many cases immediate action. However, it is also important that we keep a few things in perspective. Though dogs have teeth and strong jaws, many more people are seriously injured in household accidents than by dogs. Children have a greater chance of drowning in a 5 gallon bucket than being killed by a dog. And the number of people violently attacked by *human beings* far exceeds those attacked by dogs.

When it comes to aggression, we hold our dogs to much higher standards than we hold ourselves or each other. Most people don't get through a day without speaking an ill word, giving a dirty look or in some other way acting aggressively. Yet, we expect our dogs to live their entire lives without expressing themselves similarly.

Dogs are experts at resolving conflict without violence. They have a myriad of offensive and defensive displays related to conflict resolution. These are body postures, facial expressions, movements and sounds which tell other dogs and us how they feel about a particular situation. One very clear example is the growling dog. By growling a dog may be trying to resolve a perceived conflict without violence (a bite). If one backs away from a growling dog and the offensive display (growling) stops, then the conflict has been resolved for now. It was an elegant nonviolent conflict resolution that worked!

Dogs that growl or show us other offensive or defensive displays are excellent candidates for training. They are very clearly telling us about things that frighten or bother them. We're getting good directions about where they need help fitting into human society. The best approach is to train these dogs carefully and nonviolently.

Sometimes dogs have a hard time getting their message across using nonviolent displays. Some dogs don't give clear signals (offensive or defensive displays). Some people don't read those signals correctly or they respond inappropriately. Example: A human hits a dog for growling. The dog bites them. The human responded inappropriately to the dog's growl. Growling didn't resolve the conflict so the dog escalated to a bite.

Many things can create a conflict for a dog resulting in aggression or a nonviolent aggressive display. Dogs sometimes guard food, objects or locations (a conflict over resources). Dogs sometimes don't like certain people – often men and / or children (a conflict stemming from internalized anxiety and a lack of experience with people). Dogs sometimes act aggressively when in pain (a conflict over physical survival). Still other dogs don't like to be petted or handled (a conflict over a perceived attack and a lack of experience with people).

Fortunately, there are resources available to help you better understand your dog. A North Coast Dogs trainer can help you determine what risk your dog presents to you and your family.

- ✚ Begin by noticing what your dog is doing. Is she resolving conflicts with offensive and defensive displays? Or is she biting people? If so, how much damage is she doing when she bites? These are important questions your trainer will want answered before training begins.
- ✚ Notice what triggers your dog. Is there a pattern to her behavior? Example: Does your dog growl only when a certain person is in the room? Does she only snarl when someone reaches to pet her?

North Coast Dogs provides behavior modification education for people living with aggressive dogs. Deciding to help your dog change her behavior is an important step. The process may be long and difficult. It will certainly take a commitment in time and effort. But in many cases the benefits are a better dog and a happier home.