



Aggression can be displayed towards people in different situations for various reasons and is a symptom of an underlying problem or stressor that should be addressed or managed humanely.

Signs of Aggression

Aggression is a dog’s way of communicating stress using body language and/or vocalizations. Common signs of aggression in dogs includes:

- Stiff posture
- Tail may be high and slow-wagging or low and tucked
- Barking
- Lunging or charging
- Growling or teeth baring
- Snapping or nipping
- Biting or shaking

Aggression can quickly increase in severity, so it’s important to monitor your dog’s body language and respond appropriately to their behaviour.

Fear-Based Aggression

The most common cause of human-directed aggression is fear. When your dog perceives a potential threat, this triggers a fear or fight/flight response and is most often displayed when they encounter someone who is unfamiliar to them, or someone they might associate with a previous negative experience.

For example, if your dog experienced pain when they were treated by a veterinarian, they may behave aggressively when they are approached by a veterinarian in future.

Signs of fear can be subtle or obvious. Some common signs of fear in dogs include:

Lowered posture	Tail tucked	Flattened ears
Tight or closed mouth	Whale eye (whites of eye visible)	Lip licking
Lifting a front paw	Trembling	Hiding or avoidance

Recognizing signs of fear is important, as these behaviours may often precede aggression. If your dog shows signs of fear, this is an opportunity to intervene and prevent their behaviour from escalating.

Ruling Out Medical Issues

Before you seek assistance to address your dog's aggression, it is recommended to have a veterinarian conduct a physical examination of your dog. Aggression can result from an underlying medical issue that causes your dog pain, discomfort, or anxiety.

For example, a dog who develops arthritis may react aggressively when touched, due to pain. In some cases, neurological disorders can lead to confusion which can also cause aggression.

A behaviour modification program will not be effective if the underlying reason for the aggression is due to a medical condition.

Sources Of Aggression

Strangers or Unfamiliar People

If your dog displays aggression towards strangers or unfamiliar people, it may be due to a lack of socialization during adolescence. Socialization involves a puppy or dog having positive experiences with a variety of people (e.g. adults, children, uniformed people) in different environments. You can read more about socialization in our EHS Puppy Socialization resource.

If a dog is not socialized or positively exposed to unfamiliar people early in life, they may perceive strangers as a potential threat. Additionally, if a dog has a negative experience with a stranger, they may become fearful of unfamiliar people they encounter in future. In these cases, the underlying reason for aggression is fear.

To address fear-based aggression, you need to change your dog's perception about strangers — from threatening to non-threatening — using counterconditioning in a behavioural modification program.

Family or Familiar People

Dogs may also display aggression towards family, household members, or people they are familiar with. Fear is also a common cause for aggression towards familiar people, which can occur during physical handling and may also be referred to as touch sensitivity.

For example, if your dog had a fearful or painful experience while having their nails trimmed, they may associate their paws being touched with fear, pain, or discomfort. Your dog may display aggression (such as growling or snapping) when you approach them with nail clippers or attempt to touch their paws.

It's easy to be offended by their behaviour, however, it's important to remember that your dog is showing aggression due to fear or the anticipation of pain or discomfort — not because they are being naughty or that they don't like you. Fearful and aggressive behaviour is your dog's only way of communicating the discomfort they are experiencing.

Resource Guarding

Another reason why dogs might show aggression is due to possessiveness or resource guarding. This is when a dog displays aggression to prevent someone from obtaining access to a valued resource, such as food or a toy.

For example, a dog may react aggressively when someone approaches their food bowl while they are eating, or if someone attempts to remove a toy or object in their mouth. Resource guarding can be addressed through a behaviour modification plan using reward-based training, which you can learn about more in our EHS Resource Guarding resource.

Recommendations

- 🐾 Get professional help from a certified reward-based trainer.
They can help you develop a behaviour modification plan that gradually desensitizes your dog to the trigger by correctly applying counterconditioning in a safe manner. Counterconditioning is a process that involves the use of positive reinforcement to change a dog's emotional response to a trigger.


Note: a "trigger" is anything that causes a dog's level of arousal or fear to increase. In the case of human-directed aggression, the trigger would be a person.

- 🐾 Consult with your veterinarian.
In some cases, the use of anti-anxiety medications can help increase a dog's threshold. In other words, these medications can help dogs cope more effectively in fearful situations, thereby, reducing the risk of aggressive behaviour. Your veterinarian can also perform a physical examination to ensure there are no underlying medical issues that could be responsible for the aggression.
- 🐾 Practice avoidance.
Do your best to avoid situations that trigger fearful or aggressive behaviour. For example, if you are taking your dog for a walk and you see a stranger approaching from a distance, call your dog towards you (use treats if needed!) and walk in a different direction. This will help keep your dog focused and engaged, preventing their stress from escalating.

Note: The more your dog engages in aggressive behaviour, the more it will reinforce the aggression.

 Ensure safety and consider Muzzle Use & Training.

Training your dog to wear a muzzle can help keep everyone safe in certain situations when your dog may bite. Using a basket muzzle allows your dog to pant and drink water. However, the underlying issue (fear) should always be addressed with a behaviour modification plan, along with muzzle training.

 Reduce triggers in your dog's environment.

For example, if your dog displays aggression when people approach their food bowl, remove the food bowl and hand feed your dog, or place their bowl in an area where people will not approach them. If your dog's aggression is triggered by encountering strangers on walks, take your dog for a walk in a quiet neighbourhood, go for a walk early in the morning or later in the day (when less people are outside) or play with them in your backyard or another private area.

 Promote calm behaviour.


Ensure your dog has a comfortable and quiet area in your household where they can relax. Using a calming pheromone called Adaptil® and playing classical music can help encourage relaxation in dogs.

Note: Adaptil® is available for purchase at Bingo's Pet Shop at the Edmonton Humane Society.

What to Avoid

 Do Not punish your dog.

This can increase your dog's stress level or arousal. Punishing warning signs (such as barking or growling) may also prevent your dog from showing subtle stress signs in the future. Next time, instead of barking or growling, your dog may bite without warning. Punishing a fearful or highly aroused dog can also cause your dog to redirect their aggression towards you.

 Do Not use aversive equipment, such as prong, choke, or shock collars.

This type of equipment uses pain to stop undesirable behaviour. Using punishment also does not address the underlying issue. It simply suppresses aggressive behaviour, but it does not teach your dog what they should do, alternatively. In addition, your dog may associate the trigger (person) with pain, which may increase their arousal and escalate an aggressive response.

 Do Not use repeated exposure to triggers.

Forcing your dog to "face their fear" or continually encounter a trigger is referred to as

“flooding.” This technique can significantly worsen fear and aggressive behaviour and can induce chronic stress, which is a welfare concern.

Note: Changing an emotional response requires gradual presentation of the trigger (starting at a long distance) with positive reinforcement for appropriate behaviour — and slowly reducing the distance between the dog and the trigger over time.

This requires the oversight of a certified dog trainer to ensure that counterconditioning is appropriately applied.

Additional Resources:

The Training Academy at the Edmonton Humane Society offers private consultations with our trainers, which can help you address your dog’s aggression. There are also many other free resources available to help pet guardians on our behaviour resources and hotline page.

For further information, please visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:
askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 70% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).