

## PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING DOGS WITH PROTECTIVE AND/OR TERRITORIAL AGGRESSION

Dogs who have problems with protective or territorial aggression protect people or places regardless of whether there is actually a threat. Because there is no, true contextual threat, this aggression represents an inappropriate, out-of-context response, and one that is potentially dangerous to the person or other animal that the dog perceives is trespassing.

In contrast, a dog who behaves appropriately takes her cues as to the appropriateness of her behavior from her people or from the context. When a normal dog is unsure as to whether a threat exists, she may give a low-level threat (a bark or a growl). By behaving this way, dogs ask questions about whether they need to worry. A normal dog makes her decision about whether there is a threat based on the response to her provocative vocalization. In other words, dogs seek information and clarity about what's really going on. This is one reason why it is foolish to bark back at or growl at a barking or growling dog: the dog correctly perceives your response as an out-of-context, and perhaps threatening, answer and then the dog becomes more aggressive.

### Roles for Appropriate Protective Behaviors

Clients often find protective and territorial behaviors desirable in their dogs, and want the dogs to protect them and their property. If there truly is a threat (an attack or a break-in), dogs treated for problem protective or territorial aggression will still react to repel the intruder. It is almost impossible to teach dogs to act in an *appropriately* protective manner unless they show signs of interest in doing so. Scaring or threatening normal dogs, or rewarding pathologically aggressive dogs, will **not** make them good protectors.

Once the dog appears to be willing to protect, those traits can be enhanced through training. The problem is that *appropriate* protection and *inappropriate* protective aggression are very different circumstances. Clients are often concerned that if they control their dog's inappropriate, out-of-context protective or territorial aggression that their dog will no longer protect them or their property if there is a threat. ***This is not true***, and it is kinder and safer to everyone to take action to ensure that the dog learn not to react inappropriately.

Dogs can protect people or animals in their household from other people and/or other animals (protective aggression), or they can protect a space (crate, car, yard, room, house) from other animals and/or people (territorial aggression). The dog's behavior becomes problematic because **the dog responds as if there is a threat when none exists**. For example, when someone hugs you in the presence of your dog, and your dog threatens the person hugging you, this is an inappropriate and out-of-context aggression. Your dog is using the same behavior that he would use to repel an intruder, but there is no intruder.

### Abuse Concerns

Some dogs react inappropriately even if no one touches their person. Sometimes dogs will start to growl if their person stops to talk to someone on the street. Clients often report that these dogs do not react if the client does not acknowledge the

presence of the passerby, while other clients complain that if their dog even sees another person on the street they begin to react. Both behaviors are a part of a continuum of problematic behavior. In either case, the person that the dog threatens can be a total stranger (a delivery person) or someone known to the dog, but not well (the client's cousin). The reasons for such aggression may lie in the dog's past history, or the dog may be developing difficulty reading and understanding social cues.

In rare cases, the dog will inappropriately protect one household member from another. This situation sometimes arises when child or familial abuse is involved. Dogs who are not sure whether the threat is real may protect the child against being yelled at or hit by the parent. If no physical abuse of the pet or child is or has been involved, the response is undesirable, exaggerated, and inappropriate.

One of the requirements of treatment for the dog will be to find ways to correct the child that do not put the dog in the position of threatening the individual doing the correcting. On the other hand, if abuse has been involved, an aggressive response can be a learned survival tactic.

### Roles for "Turf"

It is widely believed that dogs are "territorial" animals and that they will protect their turf (bed, crate, house, yard, et cetera). Animals will often protect such areas, but usually do so by marking and posturing, rather than by threats and violence. These situations are seldom truly about "turf." Such situations are usually about whether the behavior is appropriate or not.

- The dog who responds to another dog who walks past his unoccupied bed by growling, snarling, and lunging, without first posturing, staring, or waiting to see if the other dog takes the bed is acting out-of-context: he perceived a threat where there was none.
- The dog who guards the front of his crate from the children by pacing and scanning is acting inappropriately: there is no threat.
- The dog who is loose in the yard and snarls frantically at anyone who comes into the yard, has a problem, but how troubling it is will very much depend on her previous experience and the neighborhood circumstances. In some neighborhoods, this behavior will have been encouraged.
- The dog who will not let anyone enter the house, and who positions herself by the door so that she can lunge and snap at anyone who attempts to enter is not exhibiting appropriate behavior.
- Some dogs will be fine with strangers when off-lead, but will vigorously protect their people when on-lead.
- Some dogs are fine in the yard, but become extremely aggressive when they are put behind a fence. This makes sense; fences leave no doubt as to the extent of their property. If the dog is naturally protective, the fence provides a barrier to patrol. For appropriately behaved dogs, their behavior will be shaped by whether they know who is approaching the fence and how the approacher is behaving. For inappropriately behaved dogs, the fence signals that everyone is a threat.

Usually, dogs who exhibit protective or territorial *aggression*—in contrast to protective or territorial *behavior*, which may well be normal—are doing so because they are unsure whether there is a problem. This uncertainty causes them to be anxious in any a threat to space or individuals may exist. Protective and territorial aggression is a diagnosis of pathology, not a normal behavior.

## General Patterns

Dogs with protective and territorial aggression can be perfectly appropriately behaved in other circumstances. If no one approaches these dogs on the street, these dogs can be terrific with the family. If no one enters the yard, or if the dog is in the house when someone enters the yard, they can be terrific. Some dogs who defend their yards or beds are perfectly fine and nonreactive to the same dogs or people when the dog is not in the yard. Protective and territorial aggression can have extremely variable patterns associated with them; however, both share in common the demonstration by the dog of the out-of-context, inappropriate, exaggerated, preemptive defense behaviors in the absence of a true threat.

The best improvement is seen for dogs whose people can identify discrete situations in which the dog will respond inappropriately.

The first step in the treatment process is to avoid situations which trigger the dog's reaction. For example, if the dog growls at anyone who approaches his crate, must he have a crate? Clear thinking will make management of this problem possible.

To change your dog's behavior, we will teach the dog that he does not have to be on guard all the time. To do this, we will use the **Protocol for Deference**, the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**, and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**. Only after your dog has successfully completed these protocols will he be able to learn that he does not have to react in protective and territorial ways (**Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitizing and Counter-Conditioning a Dog or Cat from Approaches from Unfamiliar Animals, Including Humans**).

The tick list below is designed to help you to control or avoid basic and common situations in which most dogs with these problems will react.

## Tick List of Tasks

1. Avoid any and all situations that may elicit the aggressive behavior. If you cannot instantly stop your dog from reacting aggressively by asking him to stop and come to you, he should not be in that situation. For example, if you cannot answer the door without having your dog bark and growl, and without having to cling to your dog's collar while he snarls and snaps, *your dog cannot go to the door with you*. Simply tell the person on the other side of the door to wait a minute and place the dog in another room behind a closed and locked door or in his crate until the person has left or is well settled into the house. If you know this pattern will regularly occur, consider posting a note near the door that explains that there may be a brief delay before you answer and open the door.
2. When enclosing dogs with territorial and protective aggression, you must use locks. Simply closing a door is not sufficient for a dog who is convinced that there is a threat to his people or property. The simplest locks are hooks-and-eyes that can be placed at the very top of every door, inside and out. Children cannot reach these and adults will or should think twice before opening them. If you know very persistent adults, please put a note on the door below the lock that tells them why you have chosen to protect your dog by locking him in the room.
3. Some people want to be able to take their dog to the door expressly for protection. As your dog improves, this will be a task that your dog will be expected to negotiate without inappropriate reaction. To expect him to do so at the outset of treatment is unrealistic. If you cannot instantly abort the aggressive behavior using a verbal request, consider a well-fitting head collar for all situations in which your dog might react. These may allow you to interrupt the dog as he begins to react inappropriately, close the dog's mouth humanely, rendering the dog safer, and can help you to remove the dog from the situation without an intensification of his aggression. All of these facets are critical for the dog's learning process. The head collar can be worn indoors so that dogs can be stopped at doors, or stopped as people within the household pass by. Do not leave head collars, or any other device on which any animal can become hung, on the dog when you are not directly supervising him. See the **Protocol for Choosing Collars, Head Collars, Harnesses, and Leads** for suggestions. If your dog cannot be fitted for a head collar a good, no-pull harness will give you leverage to help maneuver the dog more safely.
4. Please make sure that you warn your neighbors that a head collar is not a muzzle. This means that the dog can still bite if no tension is on the lead. Use of head collars still permits *appropriately* protective aggression. Do not make excuses for inappropriate aggression. For problem dogs, inappropriate aggression is far more common than appropriate aggression; do not rationalize a potentially dangerous situation.
5. If the dog growls or lunges, calmly say "no" or whatever word you wish to use to act as a flag that the response was inappropriate and the interaction is over, and disrupt the situation by leaving, and so removing you as an object of protection, or by bringing the dog into another room where he can be enclosed. For dogs who may also have impulse control aggression, which can co-occur with protective and territorial aggression, grabbing the dog when he reacts can put the client at risk. These dogs should be wearing head collars so that the risk can be minimized.
6. Dogs can be let out of a room in which they have been placed **only** under the following circumstances:
  - a. the dog is quiet and calm and
  - b. the dog, when released, willingly and perfectly performs a few exercises from the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**, thus demonstrating his willingness to defer to you and to remain calm and attentive.If the visitor is still present, the dog can be introduced to them if:
  - a. he is on a head collar,
  - b. the visitor **does not** solicit the dog, instead letting the dog come to them, and

- c. when the dog comes to the visitor, the visitor requests that the dog sit, the dog complies, and the visitor verbally praises the dog, but otherwise ignores him.
- If these circumstances are not possible, the dog should stay securely protected behind a locked door.
7. Please warn your neighbors and friends that *any dog who is aggressive for whatever reason can be dangerous* and that it is important that they comply with your instructions to minimize danger to the dog and to themselves. *Please emphasize that such compliance will help the dog to improve.* This is also true for dogs who are protective or territorially aggressive with other dogs. In such circumstances, the other dog must also be able to respond appropriately.
  8. Sudden arm gestures or motions, including shaking hands and reaching over fences, may be perceived as a threat to dogs with protective aggression. Caution people to avoid such gestures and be alert for potential problems so that you can avoid having the dog react.
  9. If your dog continues to bark, growl, or to ignore you in any circumstance, **and** working through a series of behavior modification tasks that the dog knows well does not help him to relax, put him in another room. **Do not physically punish the dog.** Taking attention from these dogs is one of the most effective and safest "disciplinary" actions you can take. Dogs need space to think, and some time alone may be helpful. As soon as the dog is quiet or subdued he can be released, but you must ensure that he can sit and be calm when loose.
  10. If your dog exhibits territorial aggression only when you are in the house, make sure that the dog is placed behind a secure door when any repair person comes. This should also hold true for a friend's visit if you cannot enforce the instructions above.
  11. If your dog exhibits territorial aggression only when you are not present, **never** leave this dog in a situation where he can have or obtain access to delivery people, et cetera.
  12. **No dog with territorial aggression should ever be left alone, loose outside.** Fences actually put these dogs more at risk and make them more aggressive because the dog has a clear and defensible boundary. *Invisible fences, which rely on electric shock, are the worst possible fence for these dogs.* Shocks will make these dogs more, not less wary. Because they are "invisible," humans do not know where the boundaries are and so may be very easily victimized by the dogs.
  13. If your dog has territorial or protective aggression, and he is with you in a fenced yard, ensure no one can enter a gate without your permission.
  14. If you decide to build a pen or run for your dog, make sure that it is not near any side walks, driveways, service areas (propane tanks), doorways, or any other areas to



All three of these "Dog on Premises" signs are on the same driveway gate. Anyone should have the expectation that at least one dog lives on the property.

which strangers might need or have access. Remember that a run will become something to protect. Unless you can protect your dog from what he will consider intruders, a run will make him worse.

15. If your dog protects his crate, bed, or eating area, and you cannot guarantee that he will be left alone, exclude others from these areas with baby gates or doors. If your dog protects these spots from another pet in the house, do not leave them alone together, unsupervised. Always ensure that they are separated, behind secured doors, when not supervised, **and** place the dog that is being territorial in a place that is a less desirable area (e.g., a spare room, rather than your bedroom) that is not as defensible or worthy of defense. The pet who is behaving appropriately should always have free rein and be able to move, unimpeded, throughout the rest of the house. You may have to move the area in which you keep your dog frequently so that they do not begin to feel that it, too, is something to protect.
16. Get a "Dog on Premises" sign, or make a sign that announces that there is a dog living on the property. This is not an admission of a dangerous dog, but it is a civically responsible reminder that a dog is on the property. Anyone who has a dog should have such a sign.
17. If you have a dog that you know is protective and/or territorially aggressive and small children come to visit, lock the dog away from the child. Children can be unpredictable and may inadvertently provoke an aggressive dog. *Do not talk yourself into taking the chance.*
18. Please do not use any form of physical punishment. You'll make the dog worse and less predictable because you will appear unpredictable and a threat.
19. Please remember that by fixing your dog's problem aggressions we will not remove any appropriate protective behaviors.
20. Please consistently practice and enforce **Protocol for Defiance and Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Program Tier 1**. When you and your dog have successfully completed **Tier 1**, you will be ready to move on to the relevant components of **Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitizing and Counter-Conditioning a Dog to Approaches from Strangers** and **Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitizing and Counter-Conditioning to Noises and Activities That Occur by the Door**.

Antianxiety medications may help some dogs that otherwise are not able to succeed in this program. Please remember that if it's decided that medication could benefit your dog, you need to use it **in addition** to the behavior modification, not instead of it.