

Forced to confront stressors, a dog will bite

Protect him from situations where he might feel threatened

■ Poquita is 6 years old, purportedly a Chihuahua mix, although she more closely resembles a rat terrier. Her owners brought her to me because she bites. As I read through her behavior history before our meeting, I understood their concerns. 'Quita seemed to bite unpredictably when being handled and fiercely guards valuable resources, especially food.

She had bitten her owners numerous times. Although the little dog's owners were committed to keeping her, they lived in fear she would bite them again, or worse, someone else.

Shortened lives

All dogs can bite. Given the right — wrong — set of circumstances, even the most docile, loving dog can be compelled to bite. Sadly, dogs who bite people tend to have short lives.

What can you do to ensure your dog doesn't add to those statistics, or if he already has, that he doesn't contribute again? First, understand that most aggression is caused by stress. Emotions related to stress include fear, anger, frustration, anxiety and distress. Stressors can pile up until they push your dog over his bite threshold. Think of it as canine road rage — stressors compound until your dog can't take it any more.

When I meet with a client whose dog has bitten, I emphasize the importance of management. It's vitally important to protect your dog from situations in which he might feel compelled to bite. An awareness of stress-related body language signals is critical, as is your ability to respond appropriately when the signals occur.

Do not punish signals such as



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Never leave a child unsupervised with a dog whether the dog is a reformed biter or not.

growing — that's your dog's way of telling you he's uncomfortable in a situation, and he needs you to help him. Instead, stop whatever stimulus is triggering the growl, and add that to your list of stressors for future work. More subtle stress signals include lowering his head, flattening his ears, hardening his expression, backing up, tucking his tail, licking his lips, yawning and scratching.

The risk of misjudging

Don't force your dog to submit to stressors. If he's fearful of small children, put him safely away when toddlers visit. If he's not fond of beards, don't let bearded Uncle Joe pet him, despite his proclamation, "It's OK. Dogs love me!" If you misjudge, and

your dog bites Joe, it's your fault, but the dog is the one who pays — sometimes with his life.

The next step is to make a list of the dog's stressors. These are often objects or people he had bad experiences with or stimuli he hasn't been exposed to that seem strange or scary to him. The list usually has at least 10 to 12 items on it, sometimes as many as 20. They might include:

- Choke chain, prong or shock collar, which we don't recommend using, as they work by causing pain
- Physical and/or harsh verbal punishment/corrections
- Mail carrier
- Small children
- Riding in the car
- Threats to his resources — food

Eight easy steps to change exposure to a stressor from negative to positive

Counter conditioning involves changing your dog's perception of a scary, aggression-causing stimulus from negative one to a positive one. The easiest way to give most dogs a positive association is with very high-value treats. I use chicken because most dogs love it and it's low fat and low calorie.

Perhaps your dog is aggressive toward men with beards because he's afraid of them or had an unfortunate experience with one.

One caveat: Because the stakes are high for a dog who bites, we recommend working with a dog behavior professional to modify aggressive behavior, especially if the behavior involves children. A dog who has been aggressive toward children may — or may not — ever be safe with children. Err on the side of caution. And remember that even the most trustworthy dog should never be left alone with a young child — there is too much potential for tragedy.

Now, to use CC&D to desensitize a dog toward men with beards. Substitute your own dog's stressor(s) in the following description of how counter conditioning and desensitization works. First, enlist the help of a bearded man! Then:

1. Determine the distance at which your dog can see the man and be alert and wary but not extremely fearful. This is the threshold distance.
2. Hold your dog on leash, and have the man come into view at the threshold distance. The instant your dog sees the man, start feeding bits of chicken non-stop.
3. After several seconds, have the man move out of sight, and stop feeding chicken.
4. Repeat Steps 1 to 3 until the appearance of the man at that distance consistently causes your dog to look at you with a happy smile and a "Yay! Where's my chicken?" expression. This is a conditioned emotional response (CER). Your dog's association with a bearded man at the threshold distance is now positive instead of negative.
5. Now increase the intensity of the stimulus. Decrease the distance in small increments by moving the dog closer to the location where the man will appear, achieving your CER at each new distance until your dog is happy to be near him.
6. Gradually increase the length of time you have the man in view at the threshold distance until your dog is happy to have him there.
7. Begin decreasing the distance in small increments, moving the dog closer to the man and obtaining your CER consistently at each new distance.
8. Have the man walk calmly past him, dropping a yummy treat as he goes.

No barking? No other signs of aggression? You've eliminated a stressor in your dog's life!



BONNIE BAKER

Time, commitment and plenty of treats can turn a dog's fear aggression at the sight of a bearded man into happy acceptance.

bowl, bones, toys, favorite locations and beloved humans

- Men with beards
- Loud noises
- Large, black dogs
- Vacuum cleaner

Then look at the list and see the ones you can eliminate. Pain or discomfort is one important area to explore. Many dogs who wouldn't dream of biting in normal circumstances may bite if they're hurting. So referral to a veterinarian is always a key part of our modification program.

Poquito had what the owners and their veterinarian suspected was a congenital defect in one or possibly both hind legs. I believed a significant piece of her biting behavior was pain-related, especially since she sometimes snapped at them during petting or when they picked her up. It was obvious she was hurting. She walked with a slight limp when she first entered the training center, and after she sat for sometime, her lameness was glaringly obvious. Her veterinarian had recommended one of the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs commonly used for chronic pain such as Rimadyl or Deramaxx, but her owners were worried about possible side effects.

I offered that given the choice between a longer pain-filled life and the use of a beneficial pain-reducing NSAID with the relatively rare poten-

tial for side effects, Poquito would probably opt for the drugs. I suggested they meet with their veterinarian again to reconsider, and they agreed.

Other stressors that are easy to eliminate are training tools and methods that depend on pain, force or intimidation. That would include physical and harsh verbal punishment.

Change the association

If small children or vacuum cleaners are an inevitable part of your dog's life, then you have to change his opinion of them so they no longer stress him through counter conditioning and desensitization.

With Poquito's resource guarding, we started a modification program to convince her that having people near her food bowl or other valuable object made more wonderful stuff happen and that they weren't trying to take her good stuff away.

Exercise is almost always useful in reducing stress, and mental exercise — training, shaping games, interactive toys — can also be helpful. Calming massage and soothing music may also create a stress-free environment. In some cases, working with a competent behavior-knowledgeable veterinarian who can prescribe behavior modification drugs may be necessary.

Aggression is a complex behavior; not one that can be comprehensively addressed here. If your dog bites or tries to bite people, your best bet is to do what Poquito's owners did — seek the help of a qualified behavior professional. If your dog is lucky enough to have an owner as committed to helping him as Poquito's are, you have a good chance of modifying his biting behavior — and possibly saving his life. ■

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Teach better play manners when an adult dog still engages in play biting

Puppies, with their painfully sharp baby teeth, are notorious for play biting. Most pups outgrow this behavior by the time they're 6 to 8 months old. Occasionally, an adolescent or adult dog continues to engage in this now-inappropriate behavior. If your teenage or grown-up dog is still play biting, take these steps to teach him better play manners:

1. Provide more exercise. Adult-dog play biting is often a sign of pent-up energy.
2. Teach him incompatible behaviors. Proactively ask him to do something else with his mouth before he has a chance to put it on you. Keep a supply of stuffed or rope toys at hand and offer him one when he approaches with the mischievous bite gleam in his eye.
3. Use negative punishment. Let him know that biting makes the good stuff — you! — go away by saying "Oops!" and removing yourself from his presence the instant his teeth touch your skin or clothing in play. If necessary, tether him to a solid object so you can do several repetitions of the "Oops!" exercise and escape unscathed.

Fatal dog bites — tragic, sensational and costly — seem to be on the increase

Each year in the U.S., approximately 800,000 victims seek medical treatment for dog bites, about half of them children, according to the Centers for Disease Control. From 2002 to 2007, an average of 28 dog-related fatalities have occurred in this country per year — more than double the number reported in a CDC study conducted from 1979 to 1998.

There are as many as a dozen or more classifications of aggression, each with its own motivations and stressors, including pain, fear, status disputes, threats to resources and invasions of territory. Of course, most bites don't end up as fatalities. In most cases the dog has no intent to kill; he just wants to make the "bad thing" stop or go away.

Any dog-related mauling or fatality is tragic and sensational. Any serious dog bite wreaks emotional havoc on victims and their families. And they are costly. In 1994, total costs for dog-bite-related hospitalization were estimated at \$40.5 million.

Among the many theories about why dog bites appear to be on the rise:

1. More homes have two working parents, leaving more children minimally supervised or unsupervised in the presence of family dogs.
2. More dogs are less well-trained due to owners' busy work and social schedules.
3. More dogs are undersocialized because of the cultural shift toward responsible dog ownership — dogs are kept safely at home instead of roaming the neighborhood.
4. Large, powerful breeds capable of doing more damage when they bite than smaller dogs became popular.
5. The population has increased, meaning more people, more dogs, more dog bites.
6. Irresponsible breeding has increased the bite potential in some lines of some breeds.