

## Aggression References

### The Toller Breed Standard Regarding Temperament

The correct temperament of an adult Toller is gentleness (with children especially), intelligence and outgoing in the field. With strangers, some adult Tollers are somewhat leery at first, especially if the owner is distant. However, when they feel the owner is outgoing and friendly with people, they too show a great deal of friendliness to people. There should be no sign of aggressiveness in a general situation with people or with other animals. Curiosity might be a better word. Tollers often are an assertive dog and require leadership, or they will want to become the leader. Establishment of family members as alpha over the Toller at a young age is essential to a well-adjusted Toller.

Discipline is needed (as with all dogs) - but with firmness NOT HARSHNESS. Control or consequences might be a better word than discipline. You must let your Toller know you are the leader of the pack and worthy of its respect and loyalty. Harshness only meets stubbornness. They are very intelligent and will work well with a happy, gentle hand most times. Teaching, encouraging then praising for a job well done is very important to this breed.

1. **Dog-to-Dog Aggression:** Some of the information below is excerpted and adapted from the Wikipedia online free encyclopedia at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog\\_aggression](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog_aggression)

This information serves as a general reference document with respect to defining and understanding dog-to-dog aggression.

[Aggression](#) itself is usually defined by canine [behaviorists](#) as "the intent to do harm". Many [dogs](#) will show "displays of aggression" such as barking, growling, or snapping in the air, which are considered distance-increasing actions, those which intend to get the person or dog to move away from the dog. Some dog-aggressive dogs display aggression that is mainly defensive, and they will actually harm another dog only if they perceive that they have no other option. Yet other dogs may develop dog-aggressive behavior due to medical reasons, such as hormonal imbalances.

[Dog](#) aggression is a common dog behavior, and can be seen in all breeds of dogs, although some [dog breeds](#) have a [predisposition](#) to display such

aggression. The [breed standard](#) usually spells out whether dog aggression is common in the breed and to what degree it is allowed. Individual dogs may or may not display the level of aggression that their breed standard suggests.

As well as breeding, a dog's experiences may affect his chance of developing dog aggression. A dog that is attacked as a puppy may develop fear-based dog aggression towards all dogs, or perhaps only towards dogs that resemble the dog that attacked him.

It is important to note that dogs that display dog-aggressive behavior do not necessarily show aggressive behavior towards humans. The two types of aggression are not necessarily related, and do not always occur in the same animal.

### **Factors contributing to aggression**

Factors contributing to the likelihood of the development of dog aggression include:

- Anxiety, fear or phobia
- Lack of structure
- Lack of proper exposure to other dogs during the critical [socialization](#) period
- Early [imprinting](#) by an aggressive or nervous [dam](#)
- A traumatic experience
- Territorial behavior
- [Thyroid](#) malfunction or other medical conditions
- Abuse from previous owners
- Medical or physical ailments
- Breeding and genetic predisposition

Dog aggression manifests at the age of adolescence to social maturity (6 months to 4 years). Warning signs such as fear and/or nervousness around other dogs, displays of aggression only under certain circumstances (while on leash, in the presence of food, in the presence of the owner, etc.), or most commonly, over-the-top play behavior can be seen at any stage of the dog's development. Play behavior such as tackling, chasing, mouthing, nipping, pawing, and wrestling are all normal [canine](#) behaviors that serve the evolutionary function of preparing the young dog for later combat and hunting. Young dogs that engage in excessive amounts of these behaviors are much more likely to develop dog aggression as they age.

Dog-dog aggression should not be confused with dog-human aggression (also referred to as "dominance" aggression when directed at the owner).

Many people commonly mistake fear and anxiety-related aggression as "dominance aggression", which is inaccurate. While Dominance is sometimes the

cause of aggressive behaviors in dogs, fear and anxiety are the greatest cause of both dog and human directed aggression.

Lack of exercise is not a cause of aggressive behavior, although exercise boosts serotonin levels, which offset stress hormones such as cortisol, and can complement a behavior modification program. However, it is a common misbelief that aggressive dogs are "not exercised enough." Many aggressive dogs are exercised regularly.

### **Fading dog aggression**

The form that treatment for dog aggression takes depends on the underlying cause of the aggression, and an accurate assessment is therefore essential. Most reputable trainers will recommend that a dog has a vet check to screen for medical changes that may be the cause of the dog aggression before attempting any form of behavioral modification.

## **2. Dog/People Aggression**

### **Understanding and Treating Canine Dominance Aggression: An Overview**

This potentially dangerous behavior disorder is rooted in a struggle for control. But if we understand the nature of this problem and treat it appropriately, everyone wins.

Dominance, or dominance-related aggression is one of the most common forms of canine aggression. It is manifested by consistent atypical, out-of-context aggressive behaviors directed toward people. These behaviors include growling, snapping, and biting. Bites are usually not preceded by a vocal warning.

Dogs display dominance aggression in a variety of circumstances. What links these events is a dog's attempt to control situations involving people. Typical provocative situations include:

- Disturbing a dog while it is sleeping
- Pulling a dog's leash to correct it
- Reaching over a dog's head to attach a leash
- Grooming a dog
- Staring at a dog
- Hugging a dog

- Handling a dog's muzzle or face
- Conducting restraint exercises
- Administering physical punishment.

Targets of the aggression may include one or more family members, or a dog may be aggressive to strangers only. Some dogs are aggressive only during a household commotion that distresses them. Not all household members may be equally victimized by dominantly aggressive dogs. Some dogs react aggressively toward young children because children are at the same eye level as the dogs and their staring is perceived as a threat. Further children are perceived as lower in the pack order than adults. A more compliant family member may be victimized more often than someone who is firm with the dog because the dog knows it can push around a compliant person. Conversely, but more rarely, some dominantly aggressive dogs know they can victimize compliant people so they leave them alone and challenge the more forceful family members instead.

Canine dominance aggression typically develops at social maturity, which usually occurs between 18 and 36 months of age. This condition can occur at a young age (8 weeks to 8 months). Although most dominantly aggressive dogs are male, this condition can occur in females. Dominance aggression is not controlled by hormones, but the presence of androgens, including testosterone, or the lack of estrogen during sexual and social development may exacerbate the aggression. The fact that dominance aggression usually occurs at social maturity suggests that owners don't cause this problem. However if the owners did not establish a clear pack order when the dog was young, this can be the starting point of the problem.

## **Diagnosis**

Before making a diagnosis of dominance aggression, rule out any medical causes of aggressive behavior. Some medical conditions (*e.g.* neoplastic, infectious, or neurological disease, and hormonal imbalances) and their treatments can cause dogs to be more reactive and to behave inappropriately.

Once medical causes have been ruled out, a diagnosis of dominance aggression is based on the recurring presence of the atypical aggressive behaviors described above. A definitive diagnosis can be made if an aggressive response intensifies when a dog is physically or verbally corrected or its behavior is interrupted.

Dominance aggression is not linked to one specific circumstance, and its diagnosis should not be based on a one-time event. For example, a diagnosis should not be made if a dog bites when pushed from a bed; the dog may have been frightened or hurt in this one time event. But a diagnosis can be made if a

dog bites when pushed from the bed on several occasions, was awake and was told to leave the bed first. The dog may or may not exhibit other aggressive behaviors (e.g. it growls when the owner reaches over its head to place a leash, yells at it, or disturbs it while sleeping). These behaviors stem from the dog's urge to control rather than from a specific activity.

Dominance aggression is not necessarily specifically linked to food-related, possessive of toys (resource guarding), or territorial aggression, but it can occur concurrently with these disorders. If so, the situation may be severe.

The frequency and intensity of aggressive behaviors do not affect the diagnosis. But these factors may affect the prognosis and the dog's potential danger to people.

### **Dominance vs. Assertiveness**

In diagnosing dominance aggression, remember that the term *dominance* is often used erroneously. The word *dominant* should not be used to describe a dog that is merely assertive, confident, or pushy. A dog can be pushy or assertive without being dominantly aggressive; such a dog can "talk back" and snort at people, but it isn't aggressive in the situations discussed above. Pushiness or assertiveness is a personality type. In fact, many owners prefer confident dogs because they work well in obedience situations and are thought to have good personalities. Because the terms *dominance* and *dominance aggression* are often used erroneously, we ask owners to avoid using these loaded terms and instead describe what their dogs are actually doing.

### **The two categories of dominantly aggressive dogs**

Because it is associated with social contexts, dominance aggression, like other forms of aggression, is probably an anxiety disorder. Dogs with dominance aggression can be divided into two broad groups: 1) those that know they are in control and can compel their owners to do their bidding, and 2) those that are unsure of their social roles and use aggressive behavior to discover what's expected of them.

Contrary to the commonly held view of dominance aggression, dogs in the first group are rare. Most dominantly aggressive dogs are in the second group. These dogs receive information about their social and behavioral boundaries based on how their owners react to their aggression. This is analogous to disruptive and sometimes aggressive teen-age children with behavior problems. Dogs in this category appear to be less sure of their relative hierarchical status. They express more ambiguity in their vocal and physical responses to what they perceive as threats. Dogs in the second group do not direct aggression equally toward all people because they respond differently to each social interaction.

According to data obtained at the Behavior Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania's Veterinary Hospital, most dogs in the second group also exhibit attention-getting behavior (Behavior Clinic, Veterinary Hospital, University of Pennsylvania: Unpublished data, 1999). These dogs are needy and are constantly setting people up to attend and defer to them. They have an abnormal urge to control and often challenge others to determine their roles in the social environment.

### **Recognizing subtle dominance aggression behavior**

Much has been written about dogs seeing people as part of their pack. This simplifies the situation. It is more likely that dogs and people can live together successfully because dogs and people have similar social systems. Dogs live in extended family groups, have extended parental care, and use vocal and non-vocal communication. More important, dogs and people both have social systems based on deference, and not normally physical violence and control. Many people think that dogs constantly fight for control and status. On the contrary, studies of wolf and wild dog behavior indicate that aggression and violence are the exception as long as the pack order is undisturbed. There is a relative hierarchy of social rule structure, and status can be affected by the age and sex composition of the social group and by an individual's skills. When there is change in the pack or as adolescents mature, there can be some minor to major aggression and violence until the pack order re-establishes.

Because dogs and people have similar social structures, we recognize many canine signals. Unfortunately, this similarity is also a problem because people assume that dogs' signals are exactly like ours. For example, some owners think that a dog is giving them a hug when the dog places its paws on the owner's shoulders. This is not a hug, it is a challenge. In communication between dogs, pressing on another with the front feet is a clear challenge. By petting dogs that are actually challenging them, owners inadvertently defer to the abnormal dogs. This petting can worsen the dogs' behavior. Thus when dealing with an aggressive dog, it is important to request advice from a knowledgeable source who can observe how owners and dog interact.

Many affected dogs exhibit subtle dominantly aggressive behaviors that cause clients to redirect their activities. For example, an affected dog will lie in front of a door or furniture so that its owner has to avoid the area, or it may lean against or have a paw resting on the owner at every opportunity. Owners need to distinguish these behaviors from mere pushiness or attention-seeking. For example, if a dog is leaning against its owner just to get attention, the owner can physically move the dog without its becoming aggressive. Unlike most dominantly aggressive dogs, dogs that lean on a person for attention do not stiffen, open their eyes, and move with the person so they are again touching or pressing. Dogs seeking closeness usually respond to verbal cues to stop leaning and then use solicitous behavior (e.g. turning their heads sideways, rolling over,

whining, wagging their tails, putting their ears loosely back). Dominantly aggressive dogs may stiffen and "talk back" by grumbling or growling. Later, the growling may get deeper in pitch, and the dog's stance, vocalization, or actions (e.g. biting) may become more threatening. In such cases, caution is urged.

In conclusion recognizing, assessing and understanding the unique situation of each aggressive dog by a competent person preferably first hand is crucial to a happy outcome for the owners and the dog.

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