

# A QUESTION OF AGGRESSION

by Rocky Boaman

Over the last year we have heard tales of dogs attacking people without cause. This has always been a problem within the dog world and probably will never end. Aggressive dogs are making world news on a weekly basis and have caused many concerns of owning certain breeds. The publicity that dogs receive when they bite someone increases the problem rather than stopping the problem. People that hear of a breed that is labeled dangerous will go buy this breed for protection. People seem to sense that a dog that is considered aggressive, will make a good guard dog.

Doberman Pinschers, Rottweilers, Bouviers, Pit Bulls and German Shepherds are the breeds most people feel are the guard breeds. This is a true statement, but these dogs are not the aggressive breeds. I have worked with eighty-seven different aggressive cases since moving to Sierra Vista and believe it or not, none of the above breeds were involved. The majority of dog bites came from the smaller breeds such as Cocker Spaniels, Miniature Schnauzers and small mixed breeds.

Out of the eighty-seven cases, only one was a truly aggressive or vicious dog. The other eighty-six were misunderstood or had a good reason to bite. Most people seem to think that if a dog bites someone, this dog is vicious instead of actually understanding why the dog did what it did. Dogs are usually not born aggressive, they learn this habit from other dogs or the owners. Dogs are here to serve mankind, not attack them. So why do dogs bite? I have listed some causes of aggression that I have noticed while counseling owners.

Leadership is the most common problem among aggressive dogs. A family that does not take the time to teach the dog right from wrong will usually have a dog that will bite. If the family leadership is weak the dog will test the owners ability to discipline the dog. If the owner cannot, then the dog will be responsible for the discipline within the family. Dogs learn at a very early age where they stand within a family. If the dog has the chance to move up the ladder of leadership, it will by challenging the weakest leader to the strongest. Another term that is used instead of leadership is dominance. No matter how it is done, the results will be the same.

The second cause is territorial rights. Many dogs, either male or female, will establish a territory within the owners property. Once this is done, then

anything entering the dog's territory is subject to battle. Many dogs are not happy with the territory that it has and will try to expand the territory as much as possible. Dogs that are allowed to run loose around the yard will gradually expand to the street, then the yard across the street, then the whole neighborhood. Once this happens, anyone who might be walking down the public street may be bitten. I had a case once where a dog would climb a six foot fence and chase people down the street until they left the dog's territory, then the dog would climb back over the fence. Stories have it that if you spay or neuter your dog, this problem will go away. I have found that this is not the case. It does take the dog's mind away from breeding, but not the territory or the threat to the territory.

The third cause is protection. This cause could be related to leadership but goes one step farther. If the owner seems to the dog to be a weak pack member, the dog will protect the person. Dogs also protect out of loyalty but not to the extremes of overprotection. A man was bitten on the leg by a small mix breed dog because he threw a stick over the owners head. The dog did not have the leadership needed to trust that the man was not a threat to the owner. The overprotective dog will growl or snap at anyone who approaches the owner. Some people find this satisfying until a law suit is filed against them.

The fourth cause is irritation. Many dogs will put up with only so much abuse from small children before the dog actually bites. A child might play with a dog for hours, but then the dog gets tired. The child continues and sometimes hurts the dog so the dog bites in self defense. One case involved a child within the owners family that was trying to get the dog to play. The dog was tired, but the child grabbed the collar and pulled the dog close. The child also had some of the dog's hair caught in the collar which caused pain to the dog's neck. The dog did what was necessary to stop the hurting. The dog bit.

The last case is abuse or fear. Many people rescue a dog from a local pound without knowing what the dog had previously undergone with a family before. The dog may have been beaten for soiling the house or chewing or digging. The past owners may have given the dog away because of undesirable traits the dog may have developed. The new owners may not understand dogs and may repeat the same procedures as before, without knowing any better. The dog ends up

with no alternative except to bite for protection. I witnessed a person literally kick and hit a dog for chewing on the couch. The dog was teething, but the owners did not take the time to think this out. I asked the owners why they punish like this and the reply was that the dog knew he had done wrong. Dogs with this problem will run if they can, but if they cannot they will defend themselves.

How can we solve our aggression problems? The answer is simple. Leadership is the backbone of any human-dog relationship. If we teach the dogs what we require of them, our problems will disappear. Leadership does not mean that we have to be harsh with our dogs, it means just the opposite. We must establish a working relationship with our dogs. *Understanding our dogs is the most important part of the leadership relationship.* By treating our dogs with the respect that they deserve, yet demanding that they obey us, the dog will truly understand it's role in our family.

Be consistent in your demands. Do not let one family member allow the dog to do things that you will not allow. Many dogs that I work with seem to be confused about what the owners have required of them. Establish guidelines that the whole family will abide by. I suggest to my clients that the family meet and decide what the dog will be allowed to do and what is forbidden.

Teach the dog some basic commands that can be used by the entire family. Down, Sit, Stay and Come are the most important commands that a dog can learn. I always encourage the entire family teach the commands together so each member knows how to give a command and the dog will understand that anyone in the family can demand obedience.

Aggression in dogs seems to be growing at a very fast rate. This is a problem that every dog owner should be aware of, and take the time to ensure their dog will not develop into a biter. Dogs are a wonderful part of our lives, however, if aggression continues to grow, we may not be allowed to own a dog. Every dog has a reason for the actions it takes, but it is up to us to determine that reason and ensure the dog does the right thing. Dogs have a right to an education that only we can give to them.