

# A Dog Trainer's Guide to Understanding and Dealing with Possessive Aggression in Dogs

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## What is possessive aggression?

- Guarding behaviour shown by dogs when a resource is threatened by another animal or by a human
- Dogs commonly guard food, toys, territory and people

## What are the signs of possessive aggression?

- The dog maintains direct eye contact during which the whites of the eyes are visible
- When approached, the dog positions his body between the possession and the intruder
- Interest in the possession increases as the intruder continues to approach
- If physical contact is made the dog freezes and tenses up
- Perked ears and a slightly opened mouth with lips possibly drawn back to show teeth
- If standing, the tail is held away from body (in an upright position), the fur around the neck and spine is erect and one leg may be lifted in preparation for attack
- Characteristic vocal signals include barking, growling and snarling

## Why and how does possessive aggression develop?

- The domesticated dog evolved from the wolf, a predator species
- Within a pack or population dominant animals often demonstrate possessive behaviour in the presence of competitors and/or subordinate animals
- Possessive aggression is needed for survival in nature where resources are often limited
- Feral dogs lacking appropriate levels of socialization display increased levels of possessive aggression when compared to fully socialized dogs
- Different values are attached to different resources or objects: the more valuable the item, the harder the dog will work to protect it

## What causes possessive aggression in dogs?

- The appearance of another individual who is viewed as a threat (to possession of the resource)
- A stressful environment with high levels of competition
- Dominance: dominant individuals are more likely to exhibit signs of possessive aggression
- Alterations in metabolism of the neurotransmitter serotonin predisposes dogs to poor impulse control
- Low levels of serotonin due to the diet
- High levels of the stress hormone cortisol
- High levels of testosterone, as seen in the intact male dog

## Are there certain breeds of dogs that are more aggressive than others?

- In the development of the domesticated dog specific physical and behavioural traits were exploited
- Genes + Environment = Temperament
- Pit bulls and other breeds including Tosas and Mastiffs were originally bred as fighting dogs
- Spaniel and Terrier breeds, which were bred as sporting and hunting dogs, show an increased incidence of possessive aggression
- Huskies and Malamutes have been bred to live in harsh conditions with limited resources
- Incidence of possessive aggression is related more to the prevalence of the breed in society than to the breed itself
- Every breed of dog and every individual dog has the potential to show aggression
- Ownership and training are the biggest determinant of whether this possessive aggression potential is realized



## How can we deal with possessive aggressive dogs?

- Through effective training techniques
- Establish a situation where the dog does not see himself as dominant to you: most effective with highly socialized dogs
- Classical conditioning: the association of an event with something positive
  - Carefully approach the dog while he is playing with a toy or object and present a tasty treat to him
  - Take the object away as the dog consumes the treat
  - Start out with objects of lower value and work up to more highly valued objects
- Habituation: let the dog get comfortable with your presence and involvement
  - At mealtime, put down an empty food dish
  - Approach dog, add a few kibbles of food to the dish
  - Allow dog to eat food and add a little more once he looks at you to signify he is finished
  - Gradually reduce the time between approaches and increase the amount of food added each time so that the dog is still eating while you re-fill the dish

