



## Critters corner presents:

### Inter-Dog Aggression

#### Overview

Some dogs are aggressive toward other dogs through fear or anxiety. For these dogs, a good offense is the best defense. In the wild, this behavior is adaptive and protects the dog from harm; however, fear can also be maladaptive when the response is out of proportion to any real threat. Fears can reach such proportions that they impair a dog's ability to function acceptably in society.

Typically, dogs that are fear-aggressive toward other dogs have been improperly socialized as pups. Fear aggressive dogs may be genetically predisposed to respond in this manner, but nurture seems to be intimately involved in the creation of such individuals. The majority of fear aggressive dogs have a checkered history of insufficient or inappropriate early socialization experiences.

Dogs that are fearful but not aggressive are the shrinking violets of the canine world and will either hide, squat and urinate, rollover or attempt to appease the infiltrator. In order for fear to be manifested as aggression, a component of dominance is necessary. Dogs with a low level of dominance and a high level of fear are the classical fear-biters. Dogs with a high level of dominance and a high level of fear are some of the most dangerous dogs around. They attack first and ask questions later. Fear aggression expressed toward other dogs is usually directed towards certain types of dog (e.g. large dogs, same sex dogs, or overly energetic dogs) or it may be to all other dogs.

#### Important Facts

- It is directed toward whole groups of unfamiliar dogs (owners often know which dogs are a problem).
- Location does not matter. Fear aggressive dogs will challenge whether on their own turf or not.
- Restraint, such that the dog cannot escape (leash, chain), often escalates the aggression.

#### How to Recognize a Fear Aggressive Dog

The postural signs of a fear aggressive dog are usually ambivalent. The dog may simultaneously growl and wag his tail. Growling, snarling, snapping and biting that occur when another dog comes too close are all signs of fear aggression. These behaviors are also displayed in other types of aggression but not in such a dense constellation. The intent is not to subtly communicate to establish relations, but rather to drive away the intruder.

Fear aggression develops gradually with the dog initially growling or barking at unfamiliar dogs. It develops along with dominance to fully-fledged expression at social maturity (18 months to 2 years). Fear aggressive dogs usually remain aroused for some time after an altercation.

#### Treatment

There are several measures that can be taken to rehabilitate these dogs but none of them or even all of them in concert will fully correct the problem. Measures that can be taken include the following:

- **Medical Rule-outs.** Test the dog for medical conditions that might be contributing to increased anxiety, especially hypothyroidism.

- **Exercise.** Ensure that the dog receives regular daily exercise (20 - 30 minutes of aerobic exercise daily is minimum).
- **Diet.** Feed the dog a healthy non-performance ration.
- **Obedience Training.** Engage the dog in regular daily obedience training sessions to sharpen the dog's response to one-word voice commands and increase owner leadership. One to two 5-minute sessions per day are usually sufficient.
- **Head Halter.** Employ a head halter to exert the optimal control of the dog in fear inducing situations. If applied properly, the head halter will cause the dog to defer to the owner's authority so that he can be introduced to other dogs under pleasant circumstances and be rewarded for remaining calm.
- **Basket Muzzle.** All dogs whose aggression has escalated to include biting should be trained to wear a basket style muzzle. A basket muzzle allows a dog to pant, drink, and accept small treats, but will prevent him from biting. Once trained to the muzzle, the fearful dog can be required to wear one in any particularly threatening situations.
- **Avoid Confrontations.** Except during training sessions, avoid exposing the dog to fear inducing situations. Identify which dogs and situations trigger a fear aggressive response from the dog and avoid these situations/other dogs.
- **Counter-conditioning.** Counterconditioning interrupts unwanted behavior by training the dog to respond to a command or activity that is incompatible with continuing performance of the fearful behavior. This technique is most effective when owners can identify and predict the situations that trigger the dog's fear response.

If the dog can be distracted by food rewards or games, this is often sufficient. For dogs that do not readily respond to food or play, it is helpful to train the dog to relax on command by responding to verbal and visual cues from the owner. Under non-stressful conditions, owners should teach the dog to sit and watch them in order to receive praise or a food treat. First, say "watch me" and move a finger toward your face. If the dog responds by paying attention in a relaxed and focused manner, reward him or her with a small food treat or praise lavishly. Perform this relaxation exercise daily for 5 days.

Each day increase the amount of time that the dog must pay attention in a relaxed pose before he receives a reward. By the end of the fifth day, the dog should be able to remain focused for 25-30 seconds no matter what the distraction. At this stage, when owners sense that their dog is about to engage in the unwanted behavior, they can use this counter-conditioning technique to interrupt the behavior before it is initiated. It is important to practice this exercise on a periodic basis to ensure its effectiveness when it is needed.

- **Systematic Desensitization.** The key is to avoid suddenly exposing the fear aggressive dog to the full intensity of the object of his fear (the other dog) by managing exposure. At no point in the program should the subject dog become fearful or aggressive during the retraining process. If this occurs, training has proceeded too quickly and the owner will need to return to an earlier stage.

A dog that shows fear aggression toward other dogs might be brought to a park and kept 50 feet away from the entrance of the park where he can observe other dogs coming and going. Remember to reward the dog for remaining calm. Once he is confident at this distance, the distance should be progressively decreased over the ensuing weeks until the dog can be right next to other dogs that were previously the focus of his fear.

If the owner has access to an assistant, a controlled desensitization program can be designed. Start training using dogs that the fearful dog is least likely to be aggressive towards and train in a location where the dog is most comfortable. All exercises should be performed with the dog on a leash, preferably with a head halter and muzzle, if necessary, for control and safety.

Both dogs should be under the full control of their respective owners. Determine the fearful dog's reactive distance and start training at a distance where the fearful dog will not overreact. Teach the dog to follow a "watch me" command when the other dog is outside the "reactive zone." Gradually, over minutes or days, have the dog approach more closely while the fearful dog remains in a relaxed posture without incident.

Depending on their temperaments, the two dogs should be more or less allowed/encouraged to accept/tolerate each other's presence. Never force the issue.

Be sure to reward the dogs for non-reactive behavior. The ultimate goal is for the fearful dog to see another dog and immediately relax and look for a treat from the owner. Ideally the dog should be focusing on the owner all the time and be happy and wagging his tail.