



## Critters corner presents:

### Predatory Aggression

#### Predatory Behavior

All dogs have some level of prey drive (the motivation to chase, catch and kill small furry or feathered creatures) because hunting and killing was a way of life for their ancestors and the means for their survival. Predatory aggression by dogs does not reflect a psychological problem and neither is the perpetrator vicious, malicious or vindictive.

Predation is a natural survival-related behavior that may sometimes alarm or disgust us. The entire predatory sequence involves searching, stalking, chasing, catching, biting, killing and then eating.

Predatory behavior is not preceded by a significant mood change or threatening gestures because either would be counter-productive to the objective – to catch and kill the prey. The absence of warning signs plus the fact that killing is the natural end point for the behavior makes it dangerous for target animals and prey facsimiles.

Many natural drives of dogs, including prey drive, have been modified by selective breeding practices. Thus, the level of prey drive varies between breed groups - even between breeds. In fact, four of the seven breed groups of dogs recognized by the American Kennel Club (sporting, herding, hound and terrier groups) have an enhanced prey drive.

Dogs with high prey drive have greater potential to pursue and perhaps kill any perceived prey species. Dogs that have been bred for herding and sporting activities have a high prey drive but may have also been bred for having “a soft mouth.” Terriers have been bred for a pure, unadulterated prey drive in the process of honing their varmint chasing and killing skills.

One of the key factors that distinguish predatory aggression from other forms of aggression is that movement often triggers it. In the wild, this movement is in the form of running and escape attempts of a small critter that the dog has honed in on as his prey. In the domestic situation, joggers, skateboarders, cyclists, automobiles, people on bicycles and running children frequently awaken the dog's otherwise dormant predatory instincts.

The results of such cases of mistaken identity can range from annoying to painful and even life-threatening. Dogs in such prey mode display relatively little mood change. They may slink up on their prey and, when within range, launch an attack. They then accelerate towards their target, either nipping at heels or biting at calves or thighs, perhaps hanging on in an attempt to drag their prey to the ground. Sometimes other dogs will be drawn in to the attack displaying “packing” behavior or “group” aggression. When the subject is a young child who is attempting to run away, the results can be disastrous.

Some people do not regard predatory aggression as a bona-fide form of aggression because there is little mood change involved. A dog that chases after, catches and kills a rabbit shows none of the affective signs associated with dominance or fear aggression. As far as the dog is concerned, it is just business as usual. However, when viewed from another perspective, it seems reasonable to classify predatory aggression along with other forms of aggression as it results in damage or destruction of another creature.

Predatory behavior may be exhibited by dogs of any sex and age. Dogs that show an extremely unwavering focus toward, and become agitated by, the movement or vocalizations of children or other pets should be closely monitored.

#### Treatment

There is no good treatment for predatory aggression. The manifestation of a high arousal level, a fixed focus on the prey subject, and difficulty distracting the dog, are all indicators of a poor prognosis. Dogs that are born with a high prey drive and have it fine-tuned by experience will always be likely to display this behavior

under certain circumstances. They cannot help themselves. The behavior is neither malicious nor vindictive but simply biologically driven and natural – though unacceptable and downright dangerous when expressed toward humans. It is the responsibility of dog owners to appreciate tendencies in their dog. For example, a dog that screams with excitement when he sees a squirrel in the back yard through the window would be one to watch in the presence of a group of fast-running young children.

- Avoidance of the circumstances eliciting the aggression e.g. put up a fence, keep the dog on a runner (though this may exacerbate the condition should the dog get free), keep the dog at the back of the house etc. Continuous outdoor supervision with the dog under control is essential. Dogs should only be walked on a leash and with a head halter if necessary for control. The dog should not be confined in a fenced area where another animal or child could enter.
- Reward-based obedience training will increase owner control, but will not prevent predatory behavior when the owner's back is turned or when the owner is absent.
- Some people feel that habituation with counter-conditioning can be used effectively in some cases to change the dogs' perception of the falsely identified prey.
- Others suggest that the only viable method of treatment is to use punishment-based techniques such as dropping water filled balloons from a passing car window or sounding an air horn at the instant the dog takes off after prey. To be effective, punishment must be aversive and timing of the punishment must be such that the dog associates the punishment with his behavior. Electric shock collars have also been suggested but are not part of treatment programs we recommend.
- Correcting dogs that prey on small animals are typically more difficult to correct than dogs that chase cars or bicycles.

The difficulty in treating predatory aggression is that it is hard-wired and driven by natural forces. Owners must understand that they are liable for any damage the dog causes if he gets loose. If the dog preys on people or small pets, the prognosis for retraining is guarded to poor.