

REFERENCE FOR PET OWNERS

Desensitizing dominantly aggressive dogs

Now that your dog has learned to defer to you by sitting and staying both on- and off-lead, you're ready for the next step in behavior modification. You need to desensitize your dog to the situations that bring out its dominantly aggressive behavior. The goal is to get your dog to remain relaxed whatever the situation and to let you pet or handle it without provoking aggression. If the earlier passive behavior modification was done correctly, the dog shouldn't view this new situation as confrontational.

No matter what situation makes your dog become dominantly aggressive (*e.g.* reaching over its head, grooming it, handling its face or muzzle), the key is to get it used to things it might see as a challenge. To do this, you need to break down the actions that make your dog aggressive into components and repeatedly expose the dog to these components in a nonthreatening manner (desensitization), rewarding the dog with food treats when it remains relaxed (counterconditioning). These components include approaching the dog from a distance and touching the dog. This requires the cooperation of two people—a handler and a helper. The helper stands or sits about 10 feet from the dog's side. The handler stands or sits in front of the dog and gives the dog cues and food treats for performing desirable behavior. The dog will be able to see the helper with its peripheral vision, but the objective is to get it to focus directly on the handler.

Step 1

The helper starts making small circles in the air close to his or her body with one arm bent at the elbow and held at waist height with the palm facing the floor. The dog needs to learn to ignore this and relax, so the handler gives the dog treats for being relaxed while the helper makes the circles. The helper gradually makes larger circles, moving them from waist to shoulder height, and makes the gestures quicker. If the dog remains relaxed, the helper can step closer to the dog but should start with smaller, slower circles again and work up to bigger, faster ones.

During these tasks, the dog should remain attentive to the person giving the commands and rewards while the

helper performs the potentially distracting activities. Looking at the helper is acceptable only if the dog quickly shifts its attention back to the handler either on its own or when the handler calls its name.

Remember, larger gestures closer to or over the dog are potential threats to dominantly aggressive dogs. Repeating the pattern of small circles, relaxation, larger circles, relaxation, approach, small circles, relaxation, larger circles, relaxation, and so on should allow the helper to continue approaching the dog.

Step 2

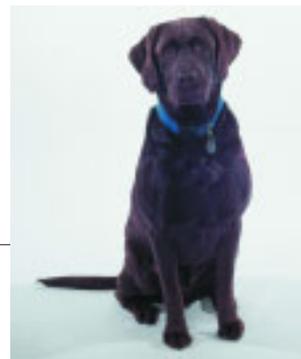
Continue these exercises until the dog is able to sit quietly and remain attentive to the handler while the helper makes large circles over the dog's head. Once this is accomplished, the helper slowly approaches the dog and attempts to touch and then push on the dog and roll it over. The circling hand should gradually be lowered until it just touches the dog's fur. If the dog permits this, the helper can slowly begin to apply more pressure to the dog with each pass of his or her hand.

Watch the dog carefully as the touching begins. Many dominantly aggressive dogs tolerate gestures that don't involve physical contact but become aggressive at the least intimate contact. The handler is responsible for monitoring the dog for any sign of displeasure. At the first sign of this, the helper should back off. You can always return to working at a less reactive level and gradually build to a more intimate level. A dog that can't tolerate contact while off-lead may accept it while on-lead wearing a head halter.

It sometimes helps if the handler anticipates the next phase of the helper's actions and gets the dog's attention before it has the time to be concerned. For example, as the helper steps forward the handler could say "Sparky!" in upbeat voice or make a nonthreatening sound that gets the dog's attention and then reward the dog if it behaves appropriately.

Step 3

Once the helper can gently push the dog to the ground without any resistance, the entire process should be re-



Continued

peated in different rooms, indoors and out, and from different positions relative to the dog (e.g. behind the dog, in front of the dog—the more threatening position). All household members should practice as both the handler and helper.

As you practice these exercises with your dog, keep the following in mind:

1. Only reward the dog when it reacts appropriately. Never reward it for growling, lunging, barking, or shaking. (See boxed text, “A rewarding experience.”) If your dog appears to lose interest after a few days, make sure you’re rewarding it at the appropriate times. You may also need to change rewards to maintain the dog’s interest.
2. If your dog becomes distressed or anxious and can’t successfully complete a part of the program, back up and slowly work on that part of the program. If the dog can’t get past one of the tasks, consult your veterinarian. Regardless, make sure each session ends on a positive note. Go back to a fun and easy exercise, and then stop. By pushing the dog past its limits, you will make it anxious, and the dog will backslide.
3. Limit sessions to 15 to 20 minutes once or twice a day. If this is too long for either you or your dog, use shorter five-minute sessions eight times a day.
4. If your dog gets aggressive and you and your helper feel threatened, stop for a few minutes, and then resume.
5. If you and your helper feel more comfortable with the dog on-lead, practice for the first few times with a Gentle Leader® Headcollar (Premier Pet Products, Richmond, Va.). If a dog sees the helper’s circling arms as threats, a head collar allows you to close the animal’s mouth, which prevents injury and issues a correction at the most appropriate time. If you use a halter, hold the leash in one hand and the reward in the other. If you choose to use just a leash, put it under your foot with a small amount of slack. This leaves both your hands free to hold the treats in a cup, and you can quickly slip your other foot across the leash so that the dog’s head is held more closely

A rewarding experience

Properly rewarding your dog with treats will help it focus on the exercises and will keep everyone safe. Use special foods you wouldn’t normally give your dog such as small pieces of cheese or hot dogs. Put the treats in a cup, and hold the cup behind your back. Keep the treats small enough to hide easily in your palm. That way your dog will focus on your cues rather than on the food. When giving a treat, bring your hand, with a lightly closed fist, up quickly to the dog, turn your wrist, and open your hand. Be careful not to startle the dog or look like you’re going to hit it.

In the beginning, you can’t reward your dog enough. Only go to intermittent rewards when your dog is performing the desired behaviors perfectly.

to the floor if the dog’s behavior requires physical assistance.

This desensitization and counterconditioning program is a gentle way to teach your dog that people are not a threat. The program is designed to teach the dog that gentle handling, such as that needed for a veterinary examination, and petting are OK. Some dogs will get as far as allowing you to press on them, but balk at rolling over. That’s OK. Take it slowly and work on stretching one leg at a time. If it takes two years to teach your dog that it is OK to rub its belly by using nonthreatening gestures, that’s fine. Getting a dog on its back in 10 minutes by using force could set you back more than two years.

The ultimate goal is that you will be able to rush up and hug your dog, but not all dogs will attain this level of behavior change. Make sure you are cautious—some dogs may never be able to be hugged or surrounded by strangers. One of the benefits of this program is that you will become aware of gestures that signal the dog’s limits. You can then decide whether you wish to attempt further behavior modification.

Information provided by Karen L. Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, Dipl. ACVB, Department of Clinical Studies, School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6010.