

B-18 PROTOCOL FOR DOGS WITH FEARFUL AGGRESSION

Fearful aggression is the second most common canine aggression. Dogs that are fearfully aggressive frequently are called *fear biters*. Many fearfully aggressive dogs do not bite; instead they growl or bark aggressively in situations that upset them. Such situations can include approaches from other dogs, approaches from all people, approaches from children, approaches from people or dogs in specific places, interactions involving a certain kind of noise, and so on. In some rare cases dogs become fearfully aggressive because they have been excessively punished or abused. Puppies that are physically punished for housebreaking accidents can become fearfully aggressive. Some dogs that are fearfully aggressive have not had any bad experiences—they are naturally anxious and fearful. These dogs are not normal but can respond well to treatment.

Fearfully aggressive dogs generally react inappropriately when they sense an intrusion and worsen if they feel cornered. They do not actually have to be cornered to feel this way. Approaching a dog that is fearfully aggressive can be sufficient to intensify its aggressive response. Many dogs continually threaten by barking, growling, or snarling but they do not bite. These behaviors can be accompanied by postures that include slinking, lowering or tucking of the tail, ears pulled horizontally back, piloerection (hair standing on end) over the regions of their neck and shoulders, hips, and tail. Some dogs urinate or salivate while exhibiting the aggressive behaviors. Just because a dog has not ever bitten before does not mean that it will never do so. Fearfully aggressive dogs often bite from behind when the interaction is ending. These dogs often back up immediately after they have been aggressive. This does not mean that the dogs will not bite from the front; biting from the front is their only recourse if they are cornered. Such dogs feel cornered if they have no other means of escape. Situations that can make them feel cornered include when the dog is crated, when it is under a table, when it is in a corner, or when it is under a blanket.

A special class of fearful aggression can develop in households with small children. This type of fearful aggression is usually directed toward children that are 2 to 5 years of age. Because these children are very active, they may fall over the dog when playing and unintentionally hurt the dog. This may be especially true for older dogs that have physical ailments such as arthritis or for dogs that have chronic or periodic ear infections. If the dog begins to associate pain or discomfort with the presence of the child and the child continues to pursue interaction, the dog may act aggressively because it fears being hurt again. In the case of a dog with periodic ear infections, the clients think that the dog has always acted appropriately in the past and do not understand the sudden snap at the child until they realize that the dog's ears are severely infected again.

Children of all ages should be taught age-specific appropriate behaviors for interacting with pets. No child should be allowed to tug on an animal's ears or tail. Children should learn to play with animals using toys, not their body parts. Children should learn to respect that pets are another species and that because of that they may not always understand that the child did not mean to hurt them. Children should learn to respect that animals have teeth and claws and can use those to defend themselves. Until the parent is positive that both the dog and the child are safe together, they should not be left alone unsupervised—no exceptions.

The treatment of fearful aggression involves treating both the fear and the aggression. Because these animals are already fearful, it is important that nothing in the course of treatment worsen this fear. These animals are not the same as those that are fearful without being aggressive. Dogs that are fearfully aggressive are potentially dangerous to the animals or people in whose presence they exhibit this response and must be treated with appropriate respect and caution.

Checklist

- 1. Do not reach toward the dog, especially if the dog is cornered or if there is no way that the animal can escape from or avoid you (e.g., when the dog is under a table or in a crate). Instead, call the dog to you and ask it to sit and relax. When the dog relaxes, give it a treat.
 - 2. Do not disturb the dog when it is resting. This could startle and frighten the dog. Instead, call the dog to you and ask it to sit and relax. When the dog relaxes, give it a treat.
 - 3. *Never* physically correct or punish the dog. Physical correction scares these dogs and will worsen their behavior. Furthermore, it teaches them that their aggressive response is the correct one because it was met with aggression. Consider using a Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar. Once the dog is fitted with this collar, the halter can be used indoors when the dog is supervised. You then have the option of correcting the dog by closing its mouth and then taking it safely out of the room, away from the inciting event. Remember to reward the dog when the dog is calm. If the dog is not calm, ignore it.
 - 4. Try to avoid any and all situations in which the dog may react aggressively.
 - 5. Do not tell the dog it is "okay" when the dog becomes aggressive—it is not okay. You may be trying to reassure the dog, which is understandable, but you are reinforcing inappropriate behavior.
 - 6. Warn your friends and neighbors that any dog that is aggressive can be potentially dangerous. Ask them to cooperate with you and avoid situations that may distress the dog. These may be as simple as not reaching toward the dog to pet it. When your friends come to visit, place the dog in another room if needed. When everyone has settled down, the dog can be introduced to the people if and only if:
 - The dog has been quiet in the area in which it was placed
 - The dog appears to have an interest in coming out of that area
 - The dog can be introduced on a head collar
 - The dog successfully sits and waits on command (see "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program")
 - Your friends agree to let the dog approach them and then to request that the dog sit and relax for a verbal request
- If the dog and the visitors can do all of these things, the visitors can reward the dog with small treats. This also helps the dog learn not to react in such situations.
- 7. Minimize or avoid sudden movements or loud noises.
 - 8. If the dog approaches any visitor (canine or human), the dog should be asked to sit and relax. People should be requested not to stare at the dog.

- 9. If small children are involved, interaction with the dog should be allowed only when supervised. A head collar should always be used, and the children should practice asking the dog to sit before giving it attention. If the visitors are small children, the dog should be placed in another room before their arrival. This will protect the children, save the dog from being placed in the situation of potentially making a mistake, and save the dog much anxiety. The dog should always have a "safe" room or area that is away from the situations (i.e., children) that are associated with the fearful aggression. This area should be comfortable and should not be used as punishment.

- 10. If the problem involves individuals or situations that occur in the house, put a bell around the dog's neck so that you know where it is. This allows you to monitor the dog's movements and to either avoid or correct any inappropriate behaviors.
- 11. After you have completed "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program" and "Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Program Tier 1," you may begin Tier 2, which focuses on desensitizing the dog to the situations in which it reacts.

As with other conditions, many dogs with fear aggression can benefit from antianxiety medication. Antianxiety medication is not a substitute for behavioral therapy but can augment it.