

On Behavior: The Dog-Dog Aggression Series

In recent years trainers have recognized that dog-to-dog aggression is an increasing percentage of their behavior modification case load. Many trainers also report that they get calls from prospective clients who report that they have already worked with a trainer, and their dog is worse.

This dog-to-dog aggression series will explore the most commonly used behavior protocols as well as describe the challenges inherent in taking these cases. What knowledge should you have before taking cases where a dog is lunging and growling at other dogs or, worse, has injured another dog? What is your liability in taking such cases? If you choose not to work on these cases, how do you determine who is qualified and whom you should avoid?

If you choose to use your own dogs or others' dogs as "helper" dogs, what are the ethical issues that should be considered in doing so? How do you keep helper dogs safe, physically and emotionally? How do you interpret a dog's body language and assess the risk to other dogs? Which behavior modification protocols should you use? Desensitization/counterconditioning? CAT? BAT? Flooding? What is "threshold" and why is understanding it so critical? When is punishment appropriate and what kind? What do you do when things go wrong? Should you offer "growl" classes? What are some of the business and marketing issues you should consider?

These questions and others will be addressed in the series by authors with real-life stories to tell. Once we have answered some of these fundamental questions, we will then present several case studies and you can test how well the presenting trainers--and their clients—implemented the protocols and managed the risks.

If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact Mychelle Blake at mblake@apdt.com. If you'd like to discuss what you read in this series, be sure to join us on the APDT BarkBoard and APDT Yahoo Listserv.

Terry Long, CPDT-KA
Editor, "On Behavior"



Safety and Ethics in Working With Dog-to-Dog Aggression Problems

Suzanne Hetts, PhD, CAAB and Daniel Q. Estep, PhD, CAAB

A Personal Perspective

On a warm July late afternoon, about a year ago, as we were walking our 12-year-old Dalmatian, Ashley and our five-year-old Irish Setter, Coral, we spotted a large American bulldog mix loose in a front yard several houses away. As we were deciding how best to avoid the dog, she spotted us. She came at us at a dead run and we knew in an instant this was going to be bad.

The dog grabbed Coral by the head and then went after Ashley. Kicking, hitting the dog, spraying her with citronella spray had absolutely no effect. To stop the attack, we needed the help of two very large male neighbors who heard the commotion and came running to our aid. Both dogs sustained puncture wounds and Ashley also suffered lacerations to her neck and ear. Suzanne broke her hand, spent five weeks in a cast, and did not regain full range of motion of her wrist and hand until months later. Dan was not physically injured but we were all emotionally traumatized, and later sought counseling for anxiety. The owner of the bulldog was convicted on criminal charges and faces a civil lawsuit, as does the homeowner where the dog was staying. The bulldog was euthanized.

Dog-to-Dog Aggression is Serious Business

The point of sharing our story is to give you a personal example of the seriousness of dog-to-dog aggression problems. An off-leash, dangerous situation can be created inadvertently in the blink of an eye with any dog you may be working with. And the effects on both dogs and people can be extremely damaging and long lasting, as they were for us.

Too often dog-to-dog aggression problems are not taken as seriously as aggression to people. This is reflected in Denver's animal control ordinances. Had the bulldog bitten us rather than just our dogs, the penalties would have been much harsher.

Deciding to work with dog-to-dog aggression problems is not a decision anyone should take lightly. Too many people seem to think that accepting aggression cases is some kind of "badge of honor" or evidence that one has "arrived" in some prestigious inner circle. We disagree. We believe the mark of true professionals in any field is knowing their professional limits and responsibly acknowledging when they are not yet prepared to accept certain assignments.

Aggression cases are the most demanding of any behavior problem. In some respects, dog-to-dog aggression problems may be more challenging than aggression to people because we cannot talk to the target of the aggression and tell him what to do to help the situation.

(The use of "helper" dogs will be discussed later in this article). Consequently, our ability to manage, control and change the "problem dog" becomes more complex.

We've trained dogs and worked with behavior problems in pets for close to 30 years, and for the last five have focused on educating pet professionals about applying the science of animal behavior to those problems. Our experiences have given us insights into the skills and knowledge people should have mastered before working with behavior problems that can have such dire consequences.

Worst-Case Scenarios

The bottom line is that you simply cannot endanger people or other dogs while trying to help a client's dog-aggressive dog. In human medicine and psychology this ethical principle is known as **Nonmaleficence**, better known as "First, do no harm" (APA 2002).

While not all problems are amenable to improvement (we believe the bulldog fell in that category), if you fail to help dogs that, in more experienced hands would have improved, then you may be contributing to an owner's ultimate decision to euthanize the dog or severely curtail its activities, resulting in a decreased quality of life. To prevent these unwanted outcomes, you need to step back and objectively evaluate your knowledge and skills, your attitudes about training methods and equipment, and whether you can provide a safe training environment.

Your Knowledge

Learning and Behavior Modification

Dog-to-dog aggression problems require a full bag of training methodologies and proficiency with all of them. At a minimum, you need to have command of the principles of operant conditioning, classical conditioning, counterconditioning, desensitization, response prevention, and even flooding.

You need to know how to implement these procedures effectively, how to smoothly move from one to the other when necessary, and how to combine them. If someone asks you if you are using flooding, if you are using operant or classical counter conditioning, or what your desensitization hierarchy is, you need to be able to explain what you are doing and why. These would be the kinds of questions you would be asked should a case end up in court.

Canine Ethology

Dog-to-dog aggression problems require the utmost skill at observing and interpreting *[continued on next page]*

canine body language. Preventing a disaster could hinge on your ability to catch a subtle sign that a dog is about to erupt a half second before he actually does. We can't stress enough how important it is for it to be second nature to you to keep an eye on the dog at all times and be one step ahead of him. These skills come only from years and years of practice watching dogs in all kinds of settings.

The elements of your behavior modification program will partly depend on your analysis of the problem. If your analysis is incomplete or incorrect, the behavior modification is likely to fail. Understanding the social behavior of dogs means you recognize the complexity of their social relationships and realize that labeling a behavior as "resource guarding," predatory behavior, or "dominance motivated" doesn't necessarily explain it and may in fact be based on false assumptions that can interfere with understanding what's really motivating the behavior.

Interpersonal Communication

To resolve dog-to-dog aggression problems you must be able to communicate as effectively with people as you do with dogs. People with fighting family dogs, or who are finding it difficult to walk their dogs, are experiencing the gamut of emotions from fear and anxiety to anger and frustration.

For many months after the attack on our dogs, it was impossible for us to allow another dog, even leashed, to get close to our dogs. It was just too anxiety producing, even though we knew it was irrational. It required professional assistance for us to get past our panic. And we are professionals who've worked with aggression for many years!

We now have an appreciation we otherwise never would have had for how difficult it may be for dog owners to comply with what we may be asking them to do. Do you have the skills to empathize with clients, not be judgmental and make them feel guilty because you think they are contributing to their dogs' emotional arousal? Can you support them, and encourage them rather than thinking they are "wimping out"? You must meet people at their starting place rather than requiring they start at yours, which they may be totally incapable of doing.

Ability to Be Flexible

If you are wedded to only one type of training methodology, this may severely limit your ability to work with dog-to-dog aggression cases effectively. Clicker training, for example, is not always going to be the method of choice.

Do you absolutely refuse to use any type of positive punishment? At some point, you will be in a situation where you must be able to stop behavior quickly, because even the best among us can't prevent every dog from ever showing aggression during behavior modification. If you aren't proficient with the *judicious* use of methods to stop behavior quickly without causing further emotional arousal or physical pain, a dangerous situation could be

created in the blink of an eye.

What about response prevention? We've come to believe this may be the key in working with many behavior problems, not just aggression. Effectively controlling a dog without undue stress for either dog or handler requires exquisite timing, the right equipment, and good handling skills. And you must be able to teach owners how to handle and manage their own dogs.

While we could provide many more examples, the point is that you must be able to adjust your training and behavior modification plans to meet the needs of the dog, the owner, and the situation, rather than asserting that if the problem doesn't respond to a single method, then it's not "fixable."

What about Equipment?

The proper equipment can make the difference between your ability to successfully change behavior while keeping dogs and people safe, or not. Equipment selection requires flexibility as well. Can you correctly fit several different brands of head collars? If you will be tethering dogs, do you have a system you know can withstand the extreme forces the dogs can exert? Collars and leashes available at a typical pet store are unlikely to be up to the task.

Many situations will require dogs to be muzzled. You have to overcome any reluctance owners have about muzzling their dogs. You must know when a sleeve or basket muzzle would be best and fully educate owners about safe limits for muzzle use.

Have You Thought It Through?

What happens if things go really wrong? What do you do if your client's dog attacks another dog when you are working with him/her? Do you know how to safely interrupt dog fights? Are you prepared to quickly get first aid or medical care to people and dogs?

What if a dog or person is injured and you are sued? You should carry at least one million dollars in general liability insurance and consult an attorney about your business structure as well as the wording for your contracts with clients. If you are found liable, you should be prepared to compensate people for damages.

Be Creative and Innovative

A review of the applied literature on dog-to-dog aggression problems is surprising because there is so little of it. This points out how little research has been done to understand the etiology of these problems and what training and behavior modification procedures work best. You may encounter dogs that are behaving in ways that don't seem to make sense and aren't responding to procedures that have worked for you in the past. Taking a weekend seminar about dog-to-dog aggression does not give you the depth and breadth of experience and knowledge to prepare you for these cases. Resolving a particular problem may require a completely unique plan you've not previously tried. If you run out of options, then it's time to ask for help >

and refer the case.

How and to Whom do you Refer?

If you decide to refer your client, how do you decide where to send them? Use the information we've just provided for your own self assessment to objectively evaluate others. Don't let your ego get in the way. Your goal is to provide the best possible help for people and dogs.

If possible, ask to sit in on a training or consultation session. If you make it clear that you are interested in establishing a long-term referral relationship, anyone who is worthy of your referral business should grant your request.

If you don't have any sources within driving distance, consider contacting a consultant who offers telephone consultations. Expect these consultants to ask for video clips. If the consultant agrees to your continued involvement, be sure everyone clearly knows their roles and that liability concerns are addressed.

Using Other Animals

Whether on purpose or inadvertently, by definition other dogs become part of these problems and their safety and welfare should be a priority. We can't think of any situation that would justify causing harm to others in order to benefit your client's dog. You may need to advise clients to muzzle their dogs in public and use leashes that attach to their waists to prevent a dangerous off-leash situation.

Using your dog as a "target" dog presents extreme risk to your companion. Your dog can develop aggression problems as a result of repeated exposure to dogs that threaten him. Anyone who puts their own or any dog in harm's way is violating the basic ethical principle we discussed earlier. When possible, we recommend using life-sized realistic stuffed animals, at least during the beginning stages of behavior modification. Future articles in this series will discuss training and "temperament" requirements for "helper" dogs.

Can You Fix Them All? Risk Assessment and Honest Communication With Clients

Clearly, not all dog-to-dog aggression problems can be safely managed or resolved. It is your responsibility to not give people false hope, but instead provide them with the most objective and honest evaluation of their dog, their situation and their options so they can make an informed decision about how to proceed. You should involve the family's regular veterinarian in this process.

Risk Assessment

A risk assessment is an evaluation of the risk of injury or death to dogs or people that a dog's behavior presents. You should conduct and discuss the risk assessment with the family before you even consider a training plan. You must know how to take a behavioral history in order to gather the information used to form a risk assessment. Overall risk involves not only dog factors but family factors as well.

Examples of dog factors include the:

- severity of any injuries caused by the dog
- frequency and intensity of the aggressive episodes
- duration of the problem
- predictability and consistency of the dog's behavior
- latency for the behavior and whether warning signs are apparent
- dog's size (in general, the larger the dog the greater capacity for serious injury)
- ease with which the aggression is elicited
- the dog's sex and spay/neuter status

Examples of family factors include:

- how much control owners have over the dog
- whether any family member is afraid of the dog
- whether there are children in the family
- degree of agreement within the family regarding the dog's problem

You must also consider the vulnerability of potential victims (e.g., big dog attacking little dog in the same family) as well as the owner's willingness and ability to follow your recommendations and to keep others safe. You can find more about risk assessments in Hetts (1999), Landsberg, et al., (2003), and Mertens (2002) among other references.

Predicting Outcomes

There are no scientific studies that correlate specific risk factors with the likelihood that a dog will cause injury or with the likelihood of behavior modification success. The factors we've listed are based on ours and others experiences.

No one can ethically offer a guarantee that their training program will prevent a dog from *ever* attacking or threatening another dog. The more you and the owners work with the dog, the more information you have to form an opinion about how well the dog will do. At one end of the spectrum are cases in which the dog's aggression is generalized and elicited in response to the most innocuous of stimuli, the owners (or you) cannot control the dog, you cannot find a behavioral starting point at which the dog does not react, and the dog has already caused injury to other dogs.

Outcome predictions are also influenced by the dog's motivation. Predatory behavior, for example, is typically much less amenable to change than is fear-motivated behavior. Dog owners deserve the best professional opinion available as to the risk their dog presents, the likelihood their dog's behavior can be changed to meet their expectations, what will be required for this to occur, and their options should they decide [continued on next page] not to work with the dog.

This article was first published in The APDT Chronicle of the Dog, copyright 2010. The Association of Pet Dog Trainers, www.apdt.com.

It is **not** your job to make decisions for dog owners. Your responsibility is to provide the client with information that is as accurate as possible and to offer behavior modification options that represent the current “standard of care” so they can make decisions that are best for them and their dogs. In human medicine and psychology this is the ethical principle of autonomy: the client should have the option to choose the treatment (or the option of no treatment). It is easy for us to think that we know what’s best for the client and dog(s), particularly if we’ve had a lot of experience working with these problems, but we are not they. Clients also deserve regular follow-ups with you so their dog’s status can be continually re-assessed.

Our intent with this article has been to provide you with tools and information to help you make an ethical choice as to whether you are prepared to offer professional services for dog-to-dog aggression cases. You should be prepared to provide the best service possible for people and dogs and, at the same time, be prepared to accept a “worst-case scenario” where you end up defending your actions in a lawsuit. While you may think this sounds like “doom and gloom,” we’ve been the expert witness in cases involving trainers so we know it’s a possibility you can’t afford to ignore. Many of the ethical principles we have talked about are described in the APDT Code of Professional Conduct and Responsibility (APDT 2003).

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Dan Estep, PhD is a CAAB, internationally respected speaker, author of numerous scientific journal articles, and the award winning book **Help! I’m Barking and I Can’t Be Quiet**. After 15 years as an award winning faculty member at the University of Georgia, Dr. Estep has spent the last 20 years helping thousands of pet owners improve their pets’ behavior, regularly teaches the behavior component of the National Animal Control Association’s Level I Training Academies, and currently serves on AHA’s newly created Advisory Committee on Animal Behavior and Training. Together with his wife and business partner Dr. Suzanne Hetts, Dan now devotes his time to their online business, which through their sites AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com, HelpingFido.com, HelpingKitty.com and their award winning subscription

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