



## BEHAVIOUR FIRST AID FOR DOGS

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When clients are awaiting an initial contact from a behaviourist when referral is being arranged, or if they are unwilling or unable to go for referral, it may be appropriate for vets to offer some 'first aid' advice. This advice is not to replace referral to a clinical animal behaviourist. Many behaviour problems require in-depth investigation plus counselling of the owner/caregiver to achieve effective human behaviour change. To do this requires both time and a high level of knowledge and experience.

The aims of the 'first aid' advice are to:

- maintain safety,
- prevent the behaviour becoming worse,
- improve the welfare of the animal.

In general, the more a dog performs a behaviour, the more established it becomes, and the more likely the animal is to keep repeating it. Avoiding the triggers for the behaviour is therefore a helpful initial approach which also helps to reduce the overall stress experienced by the dog and improve their welfare. Punishment of any kind, including shouting at an animal, should be avoided as it is likely to increase their feelings of anxiety, which will make the situation worse. Dogs who are exhibiting inappropriate behaviour are not doing so to be 'naughty' or to 'get their owners back' for something, they are behaving according to the emotions they are feeling. Confrontation should also be avoided as this increases stress which contributes to the emotional arousal that can 'spill over' into aggression. It is particularly important not to punish growling as this is a means for a dog to communicate their emotion about something their owner or another individual is doing. Owners often overlook or misinterpret subtle signs of stress and fear/anxiety in dogs, so they may need to growl to make their message more obvious. Punishing growling may suppress it, if the dog is scared of the punishment, but often leads to a dog feeling that the only way they'll be 'listened' to when trying to communicate how distressed they are is to snap or bite. This explains many of the cases in which a dog apparently bites someone 'without any warning.'

### **Aggressive behaviour towards familiar people at home**

**Underlying cause** There are several possible motivations for this, but the underlying emotion is often fear/anxiety or frustration and the dogs are often experiencing high levels of stress and emotional arousal.

**Risk** This depends on several factors:

- the size and strength of the dog;
- the people involved (whether there are children or vulnerable people in the household);
- the contexts in which the behaviour occurs;
- whether it is predictable and
- whether severe bites or scratches have been inflicted.

Owner factors also need to be taken into account. These include the owner's willingness to accept the potential risk posed by their dog or cat's behaviour and their ability to implement management strategies to reduce this. In situations of extreme risk, especially if the owner is unable to predict

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situations in which aggression is likely to occur, it may be necessary to advise that the animal be rehomed (if it is likely that their behaviour could be effectively dealt with in a different environment) or euthanased. In all cases it is advisable for the vet to accurately document in the animal's clinical notes everything that the owner has told them, the advice that they have given and the rationale for this advice.

**When to give first aid advice** When the aggressive behaviour has not involved injury, and other risk factors are not deemed to be high, first aid advice can be given, but the owner should be advised that it is not aimed at 'curing' the behaviour, but of preventing it getting worse while hopefully maintaining safety. The owner should be strongly recommended to accept referral to a clinical animal behaviourist for a complete assessment and behavioural modification plan to work on resolving the behaviour. When aggressive behaviour occurs in a specific context, safety can be maintained by separating the dog from the targets of the aggressive behaviour in these contexts using management such as stairgates and separate rooms. This is particularly important if vulnerable people are involved.

Resource guarding. Many dogs value food very highly and some will show aggressive behaviour to guard food from people or other dogs whom they perceive as competitors for the food.

It should be advised that such dogs are fed in a room on their own and called out from the room and rewarded with a treat before their bowl is retrieved. They should not be given chew items (such as bones) that are not designed to be consumed fully and any consumable chews should only be given when they are in a room on their own, or behind a stairgate. Nobody should approach them when they have a food item or attempt to take stolen food from them.



A dog who guards objects should not be approached if they are guarding. Any objects that are likely to be guarded should be removed from the environment when the dog is not present, and the dog placed behind a stairgate when there are children or other vulnerable people present.



A dog who guards positions on the sofa should be excluded from the room when visitors are present and family members should avoid approaching them when they are on the chosen sofa. The dog could be provided with a new comfortable bed and encouraged to spend time there. Ideally they should be trained to get on and off the sofa for food treat rewards, so that they can be directed onto their own bed if they ever get onto the sofa. The owners could regularly toss treats to the dog on the new bed when they are near, but not to approach the dog closely, so that the dog does not perceive their approach as a threat.

Since guarding involves an underlying emotion of anxiety that a valued resource is going to be taken away from them, guarders are often very stressed which can significantly affect their welfare. The previous behaviour of owners has often inadvertently encouraged guarding behaviour when they have taken 'stolen' items off puppies and young dogs without appropriately exchanging them with something else.

Aggressive behaviour when handled. Dogs and cats who show aggressive behaviour when being picked up, groomed, having a harness put on etc are generally anxious about the procedure. In the

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short-term, handling should be avoided. Dogs who are worried about having their harness put on may be able to be walked with lead and collar. For essential husbandry, such as coat care in dogs prone to matting, periodic sedation may be required to facilitate clipping.

## **Aggressive behaviour towards unfamiliar people approaching the property**

**Cause** Aggressive behaviour towards unfamiliar people approaching the home is caused by an underlying emotion of fear and is motivated to make them go away (which seems successful when delivery people leave). It can be stressful for many dogs who perceive that their action is the only thing stopping the people getting in.

**Advice** Dogs who show aggressive behaviour towards people approaching or entering their home should be prevented from having direct access to the front door by the use of stairgates or closing internal doors. If there is a gate into a garden that the dog has access to, this should be locked so that unexpected visitors cannot enter. Installing an external post-box at a distance from the front door could avoid the daily trigger of the post-man. The dog should not be allowed to greet visitors at the door and should remain in another room while visitors are admitted and become settled.

## **Reactivity to unfamiliar people on walks.**

**Cause** This is also generally due to an emotion of fear. Dogs who had poor socialisation with a range of people during the sensitive part of their development in the first few months of life can be fearful of people in later life. Some are only fearful of people of certain types, such as tall men with beards.

**Advice** To avoid these triggers, owners shouldn't walk their dog in busy areas and places where people can suddenly appear around corners. When they see people in the distance, they should avoid walking directly towards them as a head-on approach will seem more threatening to the dog. If the dog has a history of biting unfamiliar people, they should be trained to wear a muzzle (in a positive way using food treats – see the FABClinicians YouTube channel demonstration by Linda Ryan and those by the Blue Cross and Chirag Patel). They should also be kept on a lead or long line if their recall is not perfect.

## **Reactivity to unfamiliar dogs when on lead.**

**Cause** Dogs who bark and lunge towards other dogs when on lead generally are fearful or frustrated – both unpleasant emotions. Fear-based reactors are generally dogs who were timid as puppies and did not have positive socialisation experiences in the first few months of life or have had some unpleasant experiences with other dogs. They frequently start to show reactive behaviour during adolescence when they learn that 'seeing off' other dogs makes them feel better. Frustration-based reactors were generally more confident as puppies but did not learn appropriate social skills with other dogs. Their owners keep them on lead because their over-excited approach and play style when off lead has upset other dogs and owners. This has resulted in them feeling frustrated at the sight of other dogs, so that they start reacting in an aggressive way. In other cases, dogs may experience conflicting emotions – a desire to approach other dogs but anxiety about social interactions. Such dogs may approach in an apparently friendly manner but lunge and bark when they get close.

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**Advice** Owners should be advised to avoid areas where they will encounter a lot of other dogs. If they live in a busy area, driving to a quieter spot where the dog can be allowed off-lead if their recall is good, or on a long line if not, is beneficial. If this is not possible, walking the dog at times when there are few other dogs around and taking evasive action when seeing other dogs in the distance will still prevent constant triggering. If the dog's behaviour poses a risk to other dogs, for example they have bitten off-lead dogs that have approached too closely, the owners should be advised to train them to wear a muzzle in a positive manner as discussed above.

Obtaining yellow warning accessories bearing the words "Needs space" or "Anxious dog" may encourage other dog owners to stop their dogs approaching off-lead ([www.yellowdoguk.co.uk](http://www.yellowdoguk.co.uk)).



## Separation problems.

Some dogs who are left alone engage in behaviours that are undesirable for the owner such as vocalising, destroying things or toileting in the house. Video recording of the dogs when left can help to reveal if they are experiencing distress, or whether there are alternative explanations for the behaviour. For example, some dogs are not fully toilet-trained, some are bored or frustrated and some enjoy chewing things that they are prevented from when the owners are present.

Truly distressed dogs experience panic when their owner leaves and many start to show distress in anticipation of the actual departure. They may pace, pant, salivate and shake. Unfortunately, a small proportion of distressed dogs just remain frozen and immobile when panicking and are not easily identified without video.

Dogs who formerly coped with being home alone, but later developed separation-related distress, may have experienced a scary event such as a loud unexpected noise when alone, and thereafter associated being alone with the scary stimulus.

The most humane way to deal with true separation distress is to avoid ever leaving the dog. Friends, neighbours and dog-sitters can be used when the owner has to go out. Some dogs are happy to remain alone in the car so can be left there while the owner goes shopping etc unless the weather is hot.

Dogs who are particularly attached to one person may be distressed when this person goes out even if other people are present. These owners should be advised to involve another family member or friend in the care of the dog. The second person could feed the dog, accompany the primary carer on walks with the dog and engage the dog in enjoyable activities and training for food rewards. This will increase the attachment of the dog to the new person.

## Sound-sensitivity

This has been discussed in a previous vet blog [Sound Sensitivities Emergency Management Blog - FAB Clinicians](#) and further advice will be available in a blog that is planned for April 2021.