

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Fearful and Defensive Aggression

What is defensive aggression?

Dogs, just like humans, have a fight or flight response when encountering circumstances that put them in a state of fearfulness. If given the opportunity, most dogs will flee (flight response) to avoid bodily harm. But if escaping isn't an option, then they may shift into fight response, also known as defensive aggression. Motivated by fear, defensively aggressive dogs will exhibit a mixture of fearful and offensive posture: low head, stiff body, pinned back ears, with warnings such as growling, lip curling, and hard barking before escalating to snapping and biting.

What does it look like?

Fearful dogs can present defensive behaviors at home and on leash. For new pet owners, the subtle signs such as lip licks, whale eyes, and pulled back ears, can be easily overlooked. These are cues that the dog wants to increase the distance between them and something that frightens them, also known as a trigger. When these signals are ignored the dog can escalate their behavior to lunging, hard barking, or snapping.

Once a dog acts on their warning, they may learn that the best way to get what they want is to repeat this more aggressive behavior. If barking and lunging at the stranger gets him to leave, the dog learns that barking and lunging is effective. Remember, the threat is from the dog's perspective. For example, a child could innocently approach the dog, with an extended hand to say hi, but the dog may perceive the hand as intent to do harm, which leads the dog to react defensively.

What do I do?

It is important to give your dog time and space to acclimate to their new environment before introducing them to other animals, large crowds, or strangers. If your pet has shown signs of defensive aggression it is necessary to know the triggers - the thing(s) your dog is reacting to. Once you know your dog's triggers then you can use positive reinforcement training to change your dog's emotional response.

- If your dog's trigger is strangers entering the home, start your training at the door. Place your pet on a leash and keep them at a safe distances from the entry of your house. If you can, stand behind a baby gate for two points of safety.
- Have a friend enter the home, but do not let them walk towards your pet. Instead, they should stand near the entrance.
- Offer your pet high value treats and praise for calm behaviors (sitting, eye contact), and when they looks at the stranger and does not react give an immediate treat. Keep the leash loose throughout the training session. By rewarding your dog, you are associating the trigger (the stranger) with a positive emotion. Over time, this will make strangers less scary and reduce your dog's need to respond defensively.

- At your pet's pace, slowly close the space between the stranger and your dog. If your pet's body shift to a fearful posture (body low, eye whites visible, yawning, panting, lip licking), or if they offers warning behaviors (growling, barking, baring teeth) then the exercise is moving too fast, there is not enough space between your dog and the scary thing, and you should reset and increase the distance.
- You can also have the stranger toss treats towards your pet when your pet is at a comfortable distance from them. Do not have them walk up to your pet, and offer them treats directly; rather, they should throw the treats from a distance, without making eye contact, no matter what the dog is doing.
- Similar training can be used if your pet displays these behaviors on leash. See our On-Leash Reactivity flyer for more details.
- Crates can provide a safe place for your dog and help them manage their stress when you have large crowds in your home. See our Crate Training flyer for more details

What not to do!

Remember the goal is to change your pet's emotional response to a trigger. Aversive, corrective punishment such as shock collars, anti-bark collars, and leash corrections can increase negative association to the triggers. Yelling, hitting, and scolding can extinguish appropriate lower warning signs like lip curling and, growling, increasing the chances of your dog escalating quickly to higher warning signs like lunging, snapping, and possibly even biting. Training does not work overnight, and all parties have to be committed.

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org>