

# RECOGNIZING, PREVENTING AND CORRECTING AGGRESSION PROBLEMS IN THE PORTUGUESE WATER DOG

*A PWDCA Temperament Committee Report with  
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Some basic observations on aggression and PWDs:

1. **Aggression is a normal response in a dog's repertoire of behaviors.** In addition to biting, other aggressive behaviors include "dental displays," growling, snarling and mouthing. All dogs must be taught to inhibit and redirect their aggression when living in a human/canine "pack."

2. **Nearly all aggression problems are preventable.** The owner begins by teaching the dog that there is a hierarchy or "pack order" in the household that consists of mom and dad at the top, children in the middle and dogs at the bottom.

3. **Most aggression problems can be corrected,** particularly with early recognition and intervention.

4. **Very few aggression problems emerge suddenly.** Usually the dog has been giving warning signs for quite some time and the owner either fails to recognize them or minimizes them. **EXAMPLE:** Your dog has never been terribly fond of children and frequently growls if someone comes near the food bowl. One day a relative's child approaches the dog's food bowl and the dog bites. Is this a case of sudden unprovoked aggression? **NO WAY!** Is it preventable? **ABSOLUTELY!**

5. **Aggression is most often a product of the environment.** Certainly there are cases of bad temperament that are genetic, but the vast majority are not.

6. **There are different types of aggression.** A dog's behavior may have multiple causes and aggression can occur at different ages and stages of the dog's development.

7. **Aggression problems may be more difficult to acknowledge in PWDs than in**

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other breeds because of the dog's appearance, popular attitudes

about the breed and the owner's expectations of the dog. Cute teddy bear types don't bite, right? **WRONG.** Attractive, small to medium sized dogs are more likely to be over-indulged and infantilized than their larger, less gainly counterparts. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that the PWD is a canine with all of the normal canine instincts and **NOT** a precocious teddy bear in a fur coat.

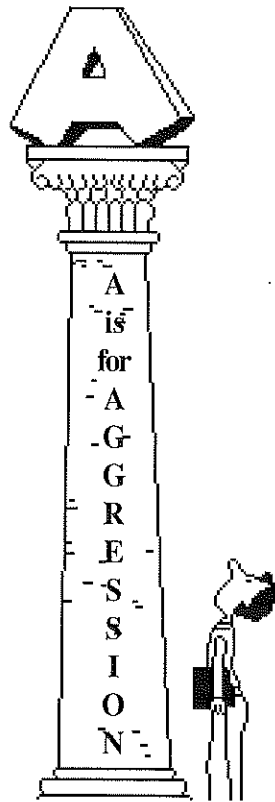
8. **It may be embarrassing for the owner to acknowledge an aggression problem in a PWD,** particularly when that owner

assumes that everyone else owns a cute, tractable teddy bear type. The tendency is to deny the aggression, rationalize it, or hide the dog at home. Owners need to understand that any dog is capable of aggressive behavior, admit that they are having a problem, and promptly seek any help they may need.

9. **The PWD is more primitive than some other breeds** which have been domesticated over hundreds of generations. A working breed, the PWD by nature is mouthy, strong, exuberant, fiery, impetuous, tenacious, reactive and bold — the very qualities that enabled the dog to do its work and survive. Many new owners may be unprepared for this powerhouse with the teddy bear looks; in fact, acquiring a PWD may be compared to a 16 year old with a new driver's license getting a Porsche — both the PWD and the Porsche may have a lot more zip than the operators are prepared to deal with! Also, the PWDs charm and intelligence are often factors in aggression. Because this breed rarely misses a beat, they know when the owner is vulnerable and perhaps unable to enforce rules. *That's* when they take over!

10. **Human aggression directed at an aggressive dog rarely reverses the dog's aggressive behavior;** in fact, the opposite is often true: the dog reacts even more aggressively. This is particularly true with PWDs because they are a bright and reactive breed. Tactics such as beating, strangling, and other forms of physical intimidation often backfire and result in defensive or fear biting.

**PLAY AGGRESSION.** Usually this is attention seeking behavior that has gone out of control. Many people think it is cute when a young puppy nips hands and ankles, grabs a pant leg and growls fiercely, or just plain jumps up and bites. The problem comes when the dog one day breaks skin on a child, damages an expensive piece of



clothing, or perhaps chomps down a bit harder than usual after the permanent teeth are in and accidentally inflicts a serious bite.

**Prevention:** Teach your pup right from the start that skin and clothing are off limits. Substitute a soft toy or chew object when the pup tries to mouth you. Move your hands away from the pup's mouth or simply get up and walk away. Roughhousing with other pups and dogs is fine, but not with humans.

**Correction:** With the puppy or adult dog that is already out of control, the rules of interacting with humans in the household must change immediately. Whenever the dog's teeth touch human skin or clothing, give the dog a command such as "no bite!" in a firm tone of voice. Some dogs may need the addition of a hand "pop" correction under the chin given simultaneously with "no bite!" If the dog is totally out of control and persists in the mouthing behavior, a "time out" may be necessary; this involves calmly putting the dog in a crate or in a room by himself for 10-15 minutes until he calms down a bit. Eliminate games of tug-of-war and wrestling with the dog. Since the dog wants your attention, try giving it to him through brief obedience training sessions several times a day. Plenty of exercise will also help this type of problem.

**FEAR AGGRESSION.** Often these dogs were not well socialized as puppies and the result is that many things in the environment are overwhelming to them. Fear aggression can also be the result of excessive punishment or a traumatic experience. Usually these dogs display aggression when they feel trapped or cornered in the presence of something they fear. An example would be biting a veterinarian who is attempting to treat the dog. Usually this type of dog is fearful of being approached and will back away growling; the dog is most likely to bite when the person approaching turns away.

**Prevention:** Socialize your puppies, and socialize them some more. Try to have your pup experience in the first four months all of the things you will expect him to handle later in life, including the groomer, mailman, dog shows, car rides, traffic noises, etc. Some dogs do go through brief fear periods at different stages in their early lives; these are normal and usually pass.

**Correction:** Begin by making a list of the things that trigger fear in your dog. Often a

dog can be desensitized to these by exposing the dog to the feared situations or objects gradually for short periods of time, and then increasing the intensity and length of exposure. Having your dog sit and stay on command by your side may help the dog feel more secure. Often the use of a head halter such as the Gentle Leader calms a



fearful dog and helps it build confidence.

**PROTECTIVE AGGRESSION.** The dog who displays protective aggression will usually growl if you attempt to take away toys, food or other objects, including objects the dog may have stolen. Sometimes the dog will attempt to engage the owner in play with the object, but then refuse to relinquish it. Closely related is **FOOD AGGRESSION**, where the dog will growl or snarl if anyone attempts to come near his food bowl.

**Prevention:** Teach your young puppy a retrieving "game" using the commands "take," "hold" and "give." Repeat this several times a day with all kinds of objects, including the pup's toys, objects the pup may pick up around the house, and food. Eventually you will have taught the dog to pick up anything and give it up on command.

**Correction.** Put your dog on a leash and teach the above retrieving "game" beginning with a neutral object, something your dog will not want very much. Progress to more and more attractive objects until you can get anything from the dog easily. Correct the dog for growling at any point in this process. In cases of food aggression, switch to a dry food and for one week feed the dog a piece at a time out of the palm of your hand. Correct any growling or snatching. For the next week, feed the dog a piece at a time out of his food bowl, picking up the bowl each time you add a piece. Then spend

a week putting a few pieces of food in the bowl and adding one more while the dog is eating. Take the bowl away periodically to add more food. Family members should take turns feeding the dog at each step of this process. It is also helpful to teach the dog to stop eating and sit and stay on command.

**DOMINANCE AGGRESSION.** Most cases of dominance aggression involve a male dog about 18-24 months old. These dogs do not accept the pack leadership of a human owner and attempt to exert control through urine marking, growling if disturbed while resting, or when pushed at the haunches or shoulders. These dogs can be perfectly wonderful as long as no one attempts to cross them, but they will nearly always react aggressively when punished.

**Prevention:** Teach pack order from the time the dog is a young pup. Obedience training is very helpful, but it needs to be continued on a regular basis with a few minutes of training every day.

**Correction:** Dominance aggression is a difficult problem to correct and usually requires professional intervention. These dogs must be taught to accept the owner's leadership and obedience training is essential. Part of the intervention process is teaching these dogs to sit and stay for anything they want, from food, to walks and attention—and continue having them do this for the rest of their lives. Use of the Gentle Leader when working with this dog often helps the dog to accept the owner's leadership more readily.

**INTERDOG AGGRESSION.** Usually this involves fighting between two males or two females. Particular situations may increase the likelihood of this type of aggression, such as a female in season, proximity of a strange dog, presence of a mutually desired object, etc. The oldest female dog is usually the most aggressive.

**Prevention:** Strong human leadership often inhibits aggressive behaviors between dogs. If dogs will be living in a multiple dog household, it is important that they are well socialized around other dogs at an early age. Adult males should generally be separated if there is a female in season nearby. **Correction:** Early intervention is essential, dogs that have engaged in multiple fights together will probably never be able to get along reliably. Do not allow adult dogs to get out of control when playing together; if serious snarling and growling begins, correct the dogs and separate for an

hour or so. If a dog persists in severe aggression toward other dogs, it should probably be placed in a single dog household.

**PAIN AGGRESSION.** Particularly with an older dog this may be a problem, but even younger dogs can suffer from ear infections and small cysts or growths that make contact very uncomfortable. Dogs with symptoms of early to middle stage PRA are not usually in pain, but may lack the peripheral vision, especially in poor light, to see someone or something approaching and may overreact with aggression in an otherwise normal situation.

**Prevention:** It is important to be aware of physical and behavioral changes in your dog. Regular veterinary care and yearly eye exams are important. Older dogs and debilitated dogs need to be protected from rowdy youngsters, both human and canine.

**Correction:** None. It is unfair to punish a dog who is not feeling well or who is experiencing diminished sensory input. The owner is responsible for helping the dog avoid situations that will trigger the aggressive response in this situation.

**SUMMARY.** Retraining an aggressive dog is not always easy and may require months of work with a commitment from all members of the family. In many cases

professional help is necessary to prevent the problem from escalating, particularly when the dog has already bitten someone or when young children are involved. Veterinarians will often be able to recommend a behavior consultant; some veterinarians themselves have developed skills in treat-



ing behavioral problems and are willing to help. Behavioral clinics are part of most large veterinary schools and this may be a resource if you live near one.

Obedience training is helpful in the treatment of most aggression problems,

but is not a substitute for behavioral intervention. An aggressive dog may need private obedience lessons if it presents a threat to the safety of people and other dogs in an obedience class. The instructor may be willing to work with your dog privately or will usually be able to refer you to someone who can help. It is important that any obedience instructor be willing to work with you and your dog; do not send your dog away with someone else for this training.

The majority of aggression problems can be corrected or at least controlled. Unfortunately, there are some cases where a dog is so extremely aggressive that he is dangerous to the people around him, and no amount of intervention will change his behavior. An out-of-control dog is rarely a happy dog and in his own way is suffering. Euthanasia is usually the kindest treatment and is often necessary in a case of extreme aggression.

In less serious cases of aggression where the owners are unable or unwilling to retrain the dog, placing the dog in another environment with full disclosure of the problem is sometimes an option. The dog may respond differently in the new environment or the circumstances which tended to trigger the aggression may be absent. It is always a good idea to notify the dog's breeder prior to placing the dog in a new environment.

## **MEMO FROM JEROLD S. BELL DVM**

**Anyone contemplating a litter between two litter tested or ancestor tested dogs rating L or A should contact Donna Buckenmaier to receive "A" certificates for the puppies.**

**Donna Buckenmaier  
(203) 255-0157**

