

Resistance Behaviors

Our topics for this week are forms of aggression, including:

- Maternal
- Pain-related
- Predatory
- Territorial and possessive
- Fear-induced
- Intermate
- Dominance

RESISTANCE BEHAVIORS

Resistance to handling may be manifested as avoidance or aggression. Aggressive behavior can be caused by irritability or pain.

Maternal Aggression

Animal mothers will protect young when they may not be willing to protect themselves. This is most acute after birth to the time of peak milk production. In dogs, this is the first three weeks after birth. A cry from a young animal of any species may precipitate an attack on the handler from the animal's parents or other adults of the group. Before handling nursing pigs, sows should be separated from the pigs at a distance that all sows cannot hear the pigs squeal. Conversely, foals should be kept within sight of mares or both will become frantic. Female rabbits become fiercely protective of nesting boxes. Females must be taken to bucks for mating because they will attack bucks taken to their box.

Pain-Related Aggression

Pain-related aggression is a natural response to noxious stimuli. A major reason for people being bitten by dogs is trying to capture or move an injured dog that is in pain. Pain from saddle sores or arthritis are common causes for formerly mild-mannered horses to act resentful of handling or being ridden.

Anticipation of possible pain can induce fear-aggression.

Frequent gentle handling of all parts of an animal's body, with no other purpose than training, can desensitize animals to anticipated pain aggression.

Predatory Aggression

Predatory aggression can interfere with handling. Retreating from an aggressive dog, especially in the case of children running from them, can be perceived as fleeing prey and aggravate aggression. This is the same reason for many dog bites in joggers and bicyclists.

Predatory aggression in cats is characterized by a low posture, crawling, and freezing in

place. Playing with cats by inviting them to pounce on wiggling fingers or toes can stimulate predatory aggression.

Territorial and Possession Aggression

Dogs or cats may establish their cage, run, yard, or family car as personal territory and become aggressive if they anticipate being separated from their territory. Even in veterinary hospitals after they are maintained in a cage for a short period, they can become protective of their cage. Some dog breeds are more prone to territorial aggression, such as Rottweilers and German shepherd dogs, which have been selectively bred for the trait of territorial aggression.

Protection of food while eating is a common possession aggression among dogs. Dogs should be trained to control that tendency while they are in their critical socialization period prior to 16 weeks of age. Horses assert dominance within their herd over individual feeding territory. Hay piles have to be separated into piles equal or exceeding the number of horses to prevent or minimize possession aggression. Hogs become more aggressive at feeding time, especially when feeding times are unpredictable.

Hamsters are aggressive in protecting their territory. Males have scent glands on their back near the hips that are used for territorial marking. Adult golden hamsters need to be housed separately to prevent fighting. The less common Russian hamster can be housed in small groups if raised in small groups when young.

Fear-Induced Aggression

Fear-induced aggression in dogs or cats is very common in veterinary hospitals. Fear-based body language in dogs is a fixed stare, rigid neck, head lowered, ears laid back, lips pulled back, and tail between the legs. Cats crouch with their ears back, wrap their tail close to their body, raise the hair on their back, and hiss combined with a low rumbling, throaty sound. If the fear-inducing stimulus (a person) backs off, the aggression is rewarded and the animal will intensify its aggression the next time it feels threatened.

Intermale Aggression

Intermale aggression can endanger handlers. Bulls, boars, rams, bucks, and stallions are particularly dangerous during mating season. Female animals in estrus will intensify male agitation and aggression. Male mice, rabbits, or bearded dragon lizards should not be housed with other males of their species because of the risk of inter-male aggression. Feral tomcats may kill young kittens from another male when taking over a new clowder (group of cats).

Dominance Aggression

A major factor of establishing dominance in a group is body size. For example, dogs attempting to dominate another will raise the hair on their back and elevate their stance in front to appear larger. Larger size means more food has been needed and successfully attained in a competitive environment. Larger individuals are more dominant than small individuals of the same breed, and larger breeds are more dominant to smaller breeds.

Male sex hormones are also major influences on displays of dominance. Castration, prior to puberty, does not eliminate the possibility of dominance aggression, but it significantly

reduces it. Post-pubertal castration effects are less impressive since adult male behavior may become ingrained on the nervous system before the removal of male hormone stimuli. Bulls display dominance aggression by pawing the ground, shaking their head, and displaying the silhouette of their side. Bulls that are ready to attack will stand with their side displayed to demonstrate how big he is to his opponent. A bull that charges a person in an open pasture should be culled and not sold at auction putting others at risk of danger.

Orphaned male grazing animals should be castrated early or placed in a social group with their own species by six weeks of age. Stallions or bulls are more easily handled if they are raised with other horses or cattle, including older males of their species. Older or larger males teach the challengers that they cannot easily bully others. Dominant males learn as they gain their social position that unnecessary fighting risks serious injury. If raising young males together, sufficient room is necessary to allow subdominant males to escape a losing fight.

A dog that is aggressive in an attempt to establish dominance over a human is dangerous, and must be handled initially with higher levels of restraint by experienced handlers. Dominance aggression is more common in some dog breeds than others. For example, it is relatively common in spaniels. Signs of dominance aggression in dogs appear in early adulthood (1-3 years of age) and are manifested when guarding food or toys, being overprotective of some family members, or growling and snapping when told “no!”

Many owners will not risk a young stallion or bull possibly getting hurt during socialization with older, larger animals and will raise them in isolation from their own species. Once the stallion or bull raised with his own kind reaches adult size, his social behavior is nearly completely set for life if reinforced with continued good handling and opportunities to socialize with others of his own species.

When stallions must be kept in stalls, the stall should be as large as possible and as visually open as possible with good ventilation. At a minimum, they should be turned out daily in stallion appropriate (at least 7 ft tall) pens where they can see other horses and be provided forms of environmental enrichment.

Punishment or domination techniques, such as holding a dog on his back and staring at him (alpha-rolls), often make a fear-aggressive animal more aggressive. Dogs and horses tend to seek human attention. Ignoring their attempts to get their handler's attention is the first step in establishing handler dominance, followed by offering attention on the handler's terms and praise only if obedient to the handler's commands. Performing simple commands such as “sit” or “down” for dogs and yielding a horse's hindquarters or backing it, place them in submissive positions and reinforce a handler's status as being their leader which, in turn, increases his safety in handling them.

Well-adjusted dominant animals only become aggressive if they have to protect themselves or their group. Within a species, animals do not risk serious injury or death to establish dominance, except for mature males during breeding seasons.

The social status among cattle is affected by age, weight, size of horns, sex, and breed. As with other species, adult males are more dominant than cows. Larger breeds of dairy cattle are dominant to smaller breeds, but breed dominance in beef cattle is not as closely linked to body size.

The size of a hog is directly related to its degree of exerting dominance within a group.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Territorial and possessive aggression are common causes of dog bites to humans
- Fear-induced aggression often occurs in veterinary hospitals and boarding kennels
- Maternal and intermate aggression are typical causes of aggression in horses and livestock.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.