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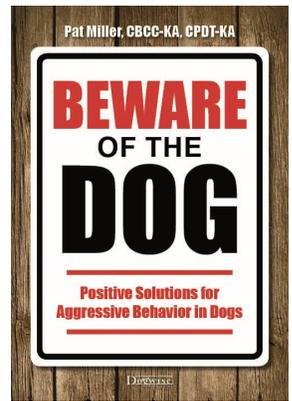
Beware of the Dog – Positive Solutions for Aggressive Behavior in Dogs

Chapter 1—Aggression: What it is, What it isn't

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Our culture and aggression

Our culture has become overly sensitized to dog bites. Once upon a time if Johnny was bitten by a neighbor's dog, Mom asked Johnny what he was doing to the dog that he shouldn't. Today she reaches for the phone to call her attorney. Once upon a time if the family dog snapped at the baby, Mom learned to be more careful about not letting the baby pull the dog's ears. Today she's dialing up a behavior professional, or worse, dropping the dog off at her local shelter. Sensationalized "dog mauls baby" headlines have turned us into a nation of aggress-a-phobes, where the smallest indication of discomfort on a dog's part sends humans screaming for their lawyers.

Behavior professionals mull over the causes of what looks to be a huge and growing problem. The population shift away from rural living and toward urban and suburban homes may have lessened our population's understanding of animal behavior in general. This lack of understanding manifests as inappropriate human behavior toward dogs, which triggers more aggressive behavior as well as a lower tolerance for bites—even minor ones. This same shift away from rural living has given dogs a much less stimulating lifestyle. Instead of following Farmer Bob around all day, herding livestock and helping with chores, today's dog is likely to spend the day sleeping, waiting for his human to come home from work. If he's lucky he gets a 15-minute walk when his owner gets home, then spends the evening hanging out with his couch-potato TV-watching human. If he seeks more mental or physical stimulation on his own, he's likely perceived as having behavior problems, when he's really just bored to tears.

A more responsible dog-owning population is keeping dogs at home rather than letting them wander freely as they did a few decades ago. That's a good thing, but as a result dogs may be less well-socialized—and more likely to bite. There has been an increase in popularity of dog breeds that contributes to our cultural sensitization—large, powerful breeds who can do serious damage if they bite, such as Pit Bulls and Rottweilers—as well as space-sensitive breeds who have a lower tolerance for inappropriate human behavior, such as Border Collies and Australian Shepherds. Finally, the appropriately

diligent efforts of animal control authorities to quarantine dogs who bite (for rabies control purposes) and craft dangerous dog laws (for public safety purposes) have probably fueled the alarmist reactions to even minor dog bites.

I'm not saying that canine aggression isn't a serious issue. It's no fun when your dog bites. If he bites *you*, there can be a serious breach of trust, and the all-important bond that keeps the dog in his forever home for life can be damaged, sometimes beyond repair. If he bites your child there is legitimate concern for that young person's safety, guilt about having put your child at risk and the specter of Child Protective Services hovering over your shoulder. If he bites someone outside the family there is appropriate concern for that person's well-being, as well as fear of lawsuits and Animal Control consequences. And certainly, dogs have the potential to kill. (Source: www.dogsbite.org/dog-bite-statistics-fatalities.php). Tragic.

Still, our culture is overly sensitized to dog bites and canine agonistic behavior (any behavior that could be perceived as threat, attack, appeasement or retreat, toward human or nonhuman members of the dog's social group). We need a new paradigm surrounding canine aggression. We need to understand that most of the social signals associated with aggression are normal and appropriate, not pathological, and that just because your dog growls at you when you approach while he's chewing a bone doesn't mean you're going to be the next mauling victim. In fact, most of the social signals associated with aggression are a dog's desperate attempt to *avoid* having to bite someone. It is when that someone misreads the signals and/or responds inappropriately that the dog is compelled to bite.

Pat Miller is the author of several best selling books on dogs and writes a column for the *Whole Dog Journal*. She and her husband live with their canine, feline, porcine and equine family in Fairplay, Maryland. Learn more about Pat and her programs at www.peaceablepaws.com