

Dealing With Territorial and Protective Aggression

Beth Bradley

Dogs are instinctually territorial and protective. They develop a sense of “ownership” related to places, people, and objects and will view unknown people and animals as “intruders.” Some dogs are satisfied simply marking their “territory.” Others will respond to intruders by taking an assertive posture, staring, or barking and then assessing the newcomer’s response. If the newcomer shows no aggression, these dogs usually take no further action. At the most extreme end of the spectrum are dogs that take action to defend their places, people, and belongings even if there is no actual threat. Dogs that growl, snarl, or lunge without first posturing, staring, and waiting are exhibiting territorial and/or protective aggression. This extreme response is inappropriate and dangerous.

When a Threat is Not a Threat. . .

Protective behavior (directed at protecting people, other animals, and objects) and territorial behavior (directed at keeping intruders away out of a particular area or place, such as a house, a yard, or a room) are inappropriate unless there is an actual threat, such as an attack or a break-in. Unfortunately, from your dog’s perspective, any unknown person or thing can be perceived as a threat. When he sees two children roughhousing, he may think they are attacking one another. When he sees a stranger approaching your front door, he has no way of knowing whether it is a burglar or a delivery person. An ordinary day is full of situations in which a dog with territorial or protective aggression may perceive (and act upon) a threat where there is none.

- Delivery people or the mail carrier approaching your door
- People walking their dogs near your home or yard
- Unfamiliar people entering your yard (Even if they are your friends, if your dog doesn’t know them, they are strangers.)
- Unfamiliar people letting themselves into your house (Particularly if you or your children are entertaining outdoors, your guests may be going in and out of the house without you.)
- Children chasing each other or roughhousing
- People screaming or yelling in excitement
- A friend running toward you or hugging you in a greeting
- A crowd of people moving around in your yard (for example, during a barbeque—when the added stimulus of food further incites the protective/territorial urge)

These are just a few of the innumerable situations in which a dog that tends to be protective and territorial may mistakenly perceive that his territory, his people, or his things are in danger. Therefore, it is vital that your dog looks to you, as the Alpha, to make the decisions in these situations.

Be the Leader

In the world of dogs, the “Alpha” is the decision maker. The “Alpha” protects the pack and its territory. Another dog in the pack that does so is challenging the “Alpha” for that leadership position. Don’t allow your dog to think he is “Alpha,” or that it is his job to deal with real or perceived threats. Make sure your dog sees and respects that you have the situation under control. If your dog has confidence in you as his leader, he will obey your commands because he trusts and respects your leadership. If he is obeying your commands, handling the situation on his own is no longer an option.

When your dog is barking or reacting to a stranger who is approaching or entering your home, immediately make clear to your dog that you are in control of the situation. Whether it is a delivery person, a contractor you need to speak with, or a neighbor stopping by, reinforce for your dog that he does not need to, nor should he, take any action.

- When your dog barks, first praise him for his alertness.
- Call him to your side.
- Place him in a sit/stay at your side. Have him hold the sit/stay while you talk to the person. Barking and growling are not allowed during a sit/stay. If your dog barks, growls, or otherwise breaks the sit/stay, correct him and put him back in a sit/stay. You are correcting your dog for breaking the command, not for defending his property. If your dog does not have the training to be that close to the person, place him in either a sit or down about 4 feet behind you and keep yourself in between your dog and the person but keep an eye on your dog.
- When you are finished talking to the person and they have left your property, release your dog from his sit/stay.

Once your dog has confidence in your ability to be “Alpha” then he will trust your judgment under any situation and allow strangers in your home.

Protect Everyone

When your dog tends toward protective behaviors, it is your responsibility to protect those your dog may mistakenly perceive as a threat. Anytime your dog is outdoors or in the company of other people, you must supervise him and give him commands that keep him from engaging in protective behaviors. If your spouse or children cannot control the dog, then the dog should not be outside with them.

You can't have your dog outside alone and expect that he will not be protective. If you are not present to direct him otherwise, he will make his own decisions about how to protect his property from perceived threats. If you are not with him, you must ensure that he people cannot reach him and he cannot reach people.

If you leave your dog in a fenced yard, a delivery person, meter reader, or other unsuspecting stranger may open the gate and enter the yard. They may not, at first, see the dog, or they may assume that because the dog is outside and unattended that he is friendly. If you are not there to direct your dog what to do, he will take action on his own. For dogs with protective and/or territorial behaviors, this action may be aggressive. If you choose a fenced yard, you will need to use a sturdy chain link fence that your dog cannot jump over. Keep in mind, a fence can keep your dog in, but in cannot keep him from barking and growling. Additionally, it cannot keep people from entering your yard unless you put a lock on the gate.

Invisible fences are even more problematic. While a solid fence may cause some people to at least hesitate before entering, an invisible fence is just that—invisible. While the fence may keep your dog in, it does nothing to keep unsuspecting strangers or animals out. A neighborhood child walking past your property could easily step over the line to where your dog can bite. Someone walking their dog along the edge of your property could absent-mindedly allow their dog to step onto your property. If your dog exhibits any protective and/or territorial behaviors or aggression, he must not be contained with an invisible fence. The potential for a person or animal to get within range of your dog's aggression is simply too great.

Conclusion

A dog that has protective or territorial tendencies is an enormous responsibility. You must spend the time and energy to train your dog as often and as long as it takes to ensure he understands and respects your leadership. For a dog with such tendencies, every day is a training day. If left to make his own decisions, he will protect his property through aggression. However, when your dog realizes that you are in control of the situation and he must follow your commands, his behavior can be controlled. Remember, the only thing keeping your dog from biting someone is the fact that you have made the decision that he can't.

About Beth Bradley

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains “cross-trained” companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles and championships in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland. Although Fyte is the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition, Beth and Fyte ranked third among the US competitors and posted scores that placed the US team in the top ten. Competing with Beth nationally, Fyte earned the title of USCA IPO 2015 Vice Champion. Most recently, Beth and Fyte competed for his national ranking. In spite of Fyte being injured in an attack by another dog during the competition, Beth and Fyte took first place overall and Fyte is ranked USA-1. In other words, he is, literally, the top dog in the United States!

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