

Preventing Problem Guarding Behaviour

Kerry Vinson

A significant percentage of the people who contact me about their dog's behaviour problems do so because of aggressive displays of territorial or guarding behaviour. In some cases such dogs are members of guarding breeds and there are instinctual influences in their behaviour, but in many other cases the dogs involved are not typically known for guarding (e.g. retrievers) and their behaviour is strictly learned. In the current environment in the province of Ontario, due to existing laws under the Dog Owner's Liability Act, there can be considerable negative consequences for dog owners (and their dogs) if they engage in inappropriate guarding behaviour.

Many people are surprised to learn the law states a dog is not allowed to engage in any behaviour that can be defined as "menacing" to another person; in some cases this means that even barking can be perceived as threatening. It is a very subjective standard which can easily be misinterpreted by someone who is not familiar with dog body language, or who may be afraid of dogs. The repercussions of this for dog owners can range from a fine and/or having their dog seized, to being sued for an extremely large amount of money. In this regard I always think of one of my first cases about a dozen years ago in Toronto wherein my clients' relatively small dog squeezed through the front door, ran out into the street and simply barked at (didn't bite or have any physical contact with) a person walking by. They were successfully sued for \$35,000 for their dog's behaviour! The "victim's" lawyer claimed that she was traumatized by the incident and could no longer sleep at night. I can only imagine what that amount would be like now, as it seems more lawyers are getting into personal liability civil suits. In the recent past I have been involved in several such cases that have been in the one million dollar plus range.

So what can people do if there is any possibility that their dog may engage in

territorial or guarding behaviour, and what should veterinarians be advising their clients to do if they have such a dog? Firstly, I think there are quite a few dog owners who want to feel that their dog will be protective of them or their property if the situation warrants it. Looking at the history of human's domestication of dogs, this is certainly one of the reasons that people have created the guarding breeds. The key piece of information here, as far as I am concerned, is that you must be able to command your dog to cease any aggressive guarding behaviour, and the dog must obey you immediately. Any other scenario may be a contravention of the D.O.L.A. in Ontario and result in unwanted consequences. As I mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for even non-guarding breed dogs to display this type of behaviour, in which case they have most likely learned it by being reinforced in some way or another. I'm sure you have probably heard of the so called "postman syndrome", where the dog barks at the mail carrier, who then goes by on to the next house. The dog feels good about this and is in fact being inadvertently reinforced for its behaviour. Through stimulus generalization the dog may then display aggression to other interlopers to its territory.

In any case, I recently took a series of photos of one of my own dogs, a Caucasian Ovcharka (arguably the most aggressive guarding breed on the planet), to illustrate what you need to be able to do in potentially problematic situations. In picture #1 a contractor arrives on the property to do some home renovations, and the dog displays an alert guarding stance. In picture #2, the contractor attempts to enter the gate and is met with an extremely aggressive response from the dog. In picture #3, I ask the dog to go into a non-aggressive down position and to ignore the visitor, allowing him to enter the gate and accepting his presence on the property. It's important to note that at no point in this procedure did I use any type of force or physical punishment on the dog, and the entire process took just under a minute. The dog has chosen to cease her guarding



behaviour and follow my requests because I have utilized positive reinforcement over time to reinforce my leadership and my directions to her in such situations.

Of course, being able to do this requires a commitment of time and consistency to teach your dog how to behave in any given situation. If you have a guarding breed dog, or for that matter any dog, you must be prepared to make such a commitment if you wish to eliminate running afoul of the dog laws in Ontario. I feel it is in everyone's best interests when veterinarians are prepared to emphasize this to their clients.

Kerry Vinson, founder of Animal Behaviour Consultants, has a BA in Psychology and has extensively studied animal learning and behaviour modification. In addition to conducting seminars on canine behaviour at colleges and other venues throughout Southern Ontario, and assessing dogs with behavioural problems, he has been designated by the Province as an Expert Witness in the area of canine aggression and has testified in a Provincial Inquest and numerous other high-profile court cases. For more information, contact him at (800) 754-3920 or (905) 352-3353.