



Aggressive Dogs are Made, Not Born

By Lorraine May, MA, MAT
Executive Director and Founder

The Misha May Foundation, *mutts in safe homes always*

A 501(c)(3) non profit dog rescue

www.mishamayfoundation.org / Info@mishamayfoundation.org

MaxFund CHAMPS Head Trainer

First of all, most dogs are reactive, not aggressive. Most dogs are frightened, and therefore, utilize warning behavior to try and make the threat go away. Aggression, or intent to harm, may follow for a dog with limited options. Individual dogs have varying degrees of tolerance. There are many things you can do to increase your dog's capacity for living a life without threats, as well as perceived threats.

Whether you agree with the title or not, it does present the issue in a way that focuses on the possibilities of prevention and rehabilitation, rather than inflated statistics and media hysteria. In my years of volunteering at shelters, training and boarding for the public, and rescuing and rehabilitating dogs, I have never once met a dog that I could, without a doubt, say was born aggressive and dangerous. I believe they exist, and I also believe they were bred that way, on purpose, for a destiny other than becoming a pet. I have also met less than a handful of dogs that I believed were not able to be rehabilitated.

However, the rehabilitation process is often time consuming, requires advanced skills, and is best executed as a labor of love. Preventing the development of aggressive behavior patterns in a dog is far wiser than trying to modify them later. Tragically, most could have easily been avoided in the first place.

Having said that, only get a puppy if you are truly committed to learning how to raise it right. Many dogs are given away when they reach a size that outweighs the amount of training the owner has invested.

Since most dogs resort to aggressive behavior like barking, lunging, growling and biting when they are afraid, it makes sense to minimize threats in their world. To build trust and minimize your dog's need to be aggressive, try engaging, with your dog of any age, according to the following guidelines.

Attune. Walk a yard in her paws. Find out who your individual dog is. Then celebrate her individuality. Treat her just as you hope your friends and family will treat you.

Be a Detective. What is the motivation here? Assume your dog was simply trying to get what he needed. How can you help him understand the rules and be successful?

Breed Specific Safety. Do not be lulled into thinking that one particular breed of dog is always safe, while another is dangerous. Each dog should be evaluated on an individual basis. If you fear a certain breed, stay away from it, but don't become an accomplice in cruelty and injustice.

Consistency and Boundaries. It's only fair to stick to the rules you created. Jumping up engagingly or cutely begging at the table are either permitted or not. Inconsistency is confusing and cruel, and defeats your own training efforts.

Containment for Safety. Be sure that your dog is safely contained within a real fence. Tying or chaining her, leaves her vulnerable to teasing or abuse, a target for wild animal attacks, and a likely candidate for increased aggressive behavior.

Electric fences (and all of the fancy techno devices based on punishment) create negative associations for the dog, with whatever was happening when she was shocked. Formerly friendly dogs have developed aggression toward humans, other dogs, or whatever is associated with the shock or punishment.

Enjoy. Choose a dog who will bring enjoyment to you and will fit nicely into your life style. Having a dog is a responsibility, but it doesn't have to be a burden. Choose and train wisely.

Positive Associations. Help your dog view the world as a friendly place. If your dog is worried, let him take a cue to relax from you. Over time you are more likely to create a positive association and see decreased fear and anxiety.

If your dog has been reprimanded when other dogs approach, for example, he will be worried, and perhaps react more vehemently, each time other dogs approach.

Protect. Remove your dog from situations she cannot handle. Just as you would not allow someone to torment your child, don't let anyone, be it family member or professional, torment your dog.

I have removed dogs from vet exams where the vet's rough handling or minimizing of the dog's discomfort was setting the dog up for a life of fear about going to the vet. I have stopped a trainer where I could see the technique was raising the anxiety level of the dog. I have changed my groomer when I saw that the finished product was more important than the dog's well being.

Provide Guidance. Assume that your child (and some other people) and your dog will have interactions which one or both of them cannot handle. Be right there to help.

Punishment. Let me begin by saying I am against it except as a very last resort. There are a myriad of choices before resorting to punishment, and in most cases, it simply is not indicated. You will hear certain professionals say that this type or that type isn't harmful. They are simply not paying attention. Or they haven't a well developed repertoire of techniques.

I prefer to invest the time, talent and energy to modify a behavior in a way that makes sense to a dog and doesn't cause them to fear or mistrust me. I am not in favor of anything that delivers an aversive, when a positive association could have been created. Even something as seemingly harmless as a water bottle or a citronella collar can be devastating to a sensitive dog.

However, if used, punishment is so powerful, it should eliminate the behavior immediately. If you have to keep doing it, then it didn't work and you are simply torturing your dog. Dogs who spend their lives being leash corrected, sprayed with citronella, or shocked by collars or fences are not being taught or trained. They are being punished.

Read. Dogs Bite: but balloons and slippers are more dangerous - Janis Bradley. "Your chances of being killed by a dog are roughly one in 18 million... The supposed numbers of dog bites splashed across the media are absurdly inflated by dubious research and by counting bites that don't actually hurt anyone." The benefits of living with dogs far outweighs the negatives. Become educated. Become a better dog owner.

Reasonable Expectations. Think about how long it takes you to learn something. Be realistic regarding the time it will take your dog. Some learning takes a lifetime.

Reward or Ignore. Reward the things your dog does that are appropriate. Ignore the bad behavior if possible. My dog jumps on me, I completely ignore him; as soon as he sits, I praise and pet. If he does it again, I leave the room. Attention getting behavior? Not anymore.

Set up for Success. Have a fairly accurate idea of what your dog is capable of. When you help him feel confident and certain about his life, he can relax and listen to what you want and need from him.

Socialization. This is happening only when your dog is enjoying himself and feels safe. Sending a nervous dog to doggy day care is traumatizing, not socialization.

Teach. "Hello. I'm a dog from the canine culture. We don't have leashes or collars or heeling, and we don't necessarily share. Anything on the floor is in our world." Assume that your dog is acting out of ignorance, just as you would in a foreign country where you don't know the language and customs.

True Leadership. True leaders wish to maintain stability, establish fair rules, and lower the anxiety and stress of their family group. Leaders who resort to force and intimidation are typically insecure about their position and power.

Volunteer. You will learn so much by volunteering for a reputable rescue group.

Win - Win Tactics. Do not confront when there is another choice - and there almost always is. When there is confrontation, there is a winner and a loser. Neither you nor your dog wants to be the loser. You might get hurt; he might lose his home or worse.