

Aggressive Communicationⁱ

Aggression is a normal and natural behavior in dogs, and animals in general. Often aggression is triggered by a perceived threat: such as a person, another dog, or inanimate object. Aggression is used by the dog to protect itself and its “possessions” from the aforementioned perceived threat. The dog uses aggressive communication signals to convey that it will defend itself, its territory, or its possessions.

In many cases, aggressive body postures or vocalizations are warning signals and the dog’s behavior may never escalate into a bite. For example, if a dog is uncomfortable with a person approaching a rawhide he is chewing, he may stiffen, growl or show his teeth. At this point, if the person decides to continue and come closer, the dog could snap or bite, but he may not. In these cases, heeding the warning signals of the dog is the best way to prevent an escalation of aggressive behavior. As previously mentioned, aggressive signals may be paired with other signals, such as fearful ones. For example, if a dog is fearful of something and its fear signals have been misread or ignored, it may switch to aggressive signals as an escalated attempt at communication. Aggressive body language includes stiffening or freezing of the body, eyes wide with a lot of white showing (whale eye), tense mouth or curled lips, wrinkled nose, showing teeth, barking, growling, and air snapping.



ⁱ Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine