



Introduction

Aggression. The very word sends tingles up the spine of many a dog trainer. Some practically bristle with excitement at the opportunity to work with a dog who is beginning to show signs of aggression, or who has already bitten. While that might sound odd, it can be incredibly fulfilling to see a dog transform from a feared, ostracized, “problem dog” who is in danger of losing his home into a trusted and treasured family member. Bringing about a major turnaround in a dog’s behavior, making a meaningful impact on the lives of dogs and their owners and, at times, helping to make the difference between life or death for a dog, can be thrilling. Working with aggressive dogs can be enormously rewarding on an emotional level as well as a financial one.

Other trainers recoil at the thought of dealing with aggression on any level. They do not understand why anyone would ever choose to work with a dog who might bite! That’s perfectly understandable. Dog bites hurt, and aggressive behavior can be frightening. I know many trainers who do not accept aggression cases, don’t ever plan to, and still have satisfying, flourishing careers.

There are also a number of trainers who are in a sort of limbo: they would like to start working with aggression issues but aren’t quite sure how to go about it. Perhaps you, like so many others, have mastered the art of teaching obedience skills and working with behavior issues, but have not yet had the experience of working with dogs who display aggressive behavior. Without having interned with another trainer or at least having had the opportunity to observe these types of sessions, it can be difficult to know how to proceed, and downright confusing to figure out how to conduct a session. I remember wondering early in my career just how the heck a trainer was supposed to even *be* in the same room as a dog who was aggressive toward people, never mind train him!

I have been working with aggressive dogs for over fifteen years now. There have been many who were aggressive toward unfamiliar dogs (although some turned out to be more what I would term “dog-obnoxious”—bullies—than truly dangerous). Others had “possession aggression.” (No, the dogs weren’t levitating or spitting up green pea soup—they had resource guarding issues involving valued items, locations, or even family members.) As it happens, the majority of cases I see involve aggression toward people. The dogs have ranged from conflicted adolescents who were testing their newfound bravado to confident adults who had inflicted multiple puncture wounds on multiple people.

Whether you are currently undecided as to whether you would like to work with aggressive dogs, have already made the decision but are not quite sure how to get started, or are already experienced at handling aggression cases, you will find this book extremely helpful. We’ll begin with a discussion of the definition, levels, and types of aggression. Next, we’ll explore the topics of liability, insurance, and maintaining personal safety at sessions. Then we’ll really “get a grip” on aggression cases: specific training equipment, secrets of taking a thorough history, and how to structure sessions. You will find questionnaires that are specific to individual types of aggression issues, and a more generalized one for taking a bite history. There are questions to add to your existing behavioral intake forms, a format for follow-up letters to be sent to veterinarians, considerations to help determine whether your liability contract is iron-clad, and valuable tips on how to handle dogs and clients more effectively.

You will get straightforward, concrete answers to questions that most trainers have, such as how and when to recommend rehoming or euthanasia, how to handle reactive dogs in group classes, and what to do if you are bitten at a session. An entire chapter is dedicated to the vital topic of how to break up a dog fight. You will also hear stories from my own professional practice throughout the book.

Your compassion and desire to help dogs who have aggression issues, combined with the knowledge you will acquire here, will surely contribute to making a positive difference in the lives of countless dogs and people.