



The Ladder of Aggression

How dogs come to bite, and recognising the warning signs





Function of aggression

It's important to note that aggression is a normal canine behaviour, functioning to increase distance between the dog and something they perceive to be a threat. Aggression is often rooted in fear or anxiety, used when the dog has no option to avoid a scary stimulus. For example, if a dog is afraid of another, approaching dog, the first may growl, and the other dog, if well socialised, will likely heed this warning, and move away. In this way, aggression serves a useful purpose in canine communication.

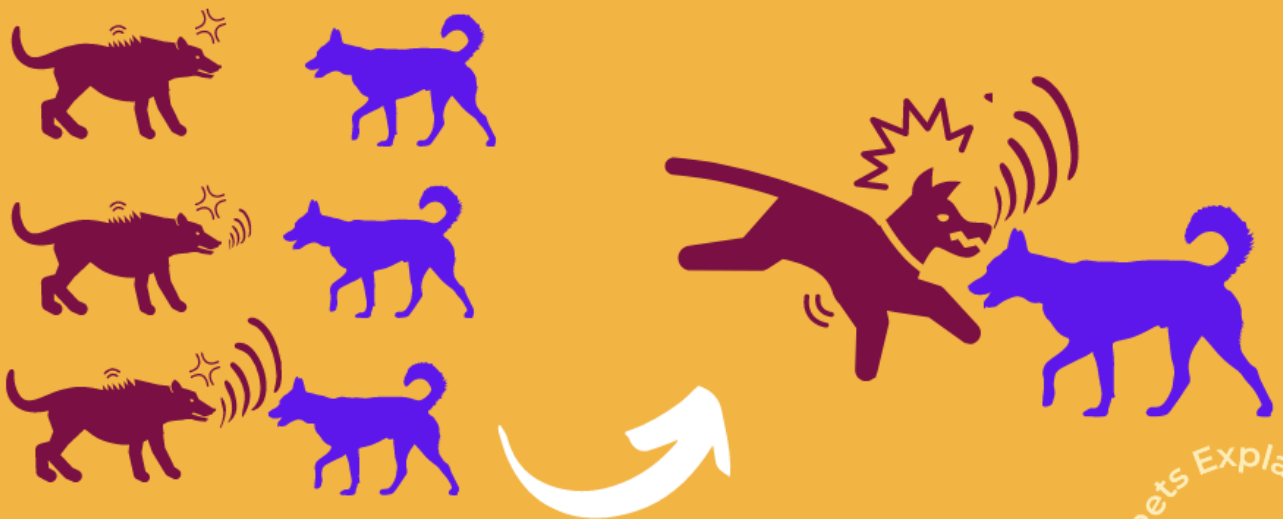


..so when does aggression become pathological?



Appropriateness

Some aggressive signals such as growling are useful, indicating when your dog is uncomfortable, thus allowing you to alter the situation to avoid further fear or aggression. However, when aggression becomes inappropriate, excessive, or is consistently exhibited to a severe, inflexible degree, the issue is pathological. It is likely that up to this point, smaller, subtler indicators of anxiety or fear in the dog have not been successful in avoiding conflict, resulting in an escalation.





Mild signals

These behaviours are subtle, and indicate the dog is quietly trying to defuse or avoid a situation he feels is threatening.



Turning or walking away



Low ears facing back **Yawning**



Tense, unsure body stance

Turning his head away

Distracting himself with sniffing things



Licking his lips briefly



Mid-level signals

Subtle behaviours have not worked, your dog escalates to use more obvious signals, and is still trying to avoid confrontation.



Rolling on to back

Freezing

Ears flat back



Crouched, tail tucked

Hiding



Whites of the eyes visible



Body hunched & tense



Danger signals

Subtle and mid-level signals have not been successful in defusing or avoiding the threat. The dog feels he has no option for escape other than active confrontation.



Biting

Air snap

Lunging forward

Snarling

Lip raised,
Teeth visible



Growling

Hackles raised

Hard stare





Avoiding bites

Here,
boy!



So, how is the ladder of aggression useful to you? Recognising mild fear behaviours and relieving your dog from the situation avoid him feeling the need to exhibit aggression. If tucking his tail is successful in ending a scary interaction, he won't feel the need to climb the ladder. Dogs that are pushed into the danger zone often may skip mild signals and go straight to biting, as in their experience, low-level signals do not work. At this point you require specialist support.