

ASK THE EXPERTS

The Dog Behaviourist

Kerry Vinson, B.A.



Our dog recently bit a visitor to our home I contacted a dog trainer from some advice and was told that once a dog bites someone, it will inevitably bite again. Do you think this is true?

In order to give a good answer to your question, I would need to know a lot more information. For example, what kind of dog do you have, how old is it, if it's a male has he been neutered, what were the circumstances surrounding the biting incident, etc.? I don't think I would want to make a general statement saying that once a dog bites it will always continue to do so.

Indeed, I have worked with many dogs (and their owners) who have bitten someone, and in the majority of cases, these dogs do not bite anyone else. Of these several hundred cases, the success rate is in the vicinity of approximately 80 percent. My criteria for success are that:

- a) the dog doesn't bite anyone else,
- b) their aggressive behaviour is brought under control and,
- c) the dog isn't euthanized because of its behaviour.

Canine aggression is a complex, multi-factorial problem that requires specific knowledge to correct. Some dogs may need to be in a household where there are no young children, whereas other dogs may be able to be desensitized through behaviour modification to almost any situation. For difficult cases, it may be necessary to employ certain medications to affect brain neurochemistry, as some types of canine aggression are thought to be influenced by low serotonin levels. Regardless, the sooner this

problem is addressed, the better the chances are that it can be corrected.

Prognosticating factors in most cases involve the degree of aggression exhibited, the commitment level of the owner(s) to keeping the dog, and the extent of their effort to consistently implement the prescribed treatment programme. Unfortunately, there are some dogs that may have reached the "point of no return" and their behaviour cannot be brought under control. Fortunately, these dogs are in the minority if all other factors are equal.

As I said earlier, I don't like to make blanket statements when it comes to dog behaviour, but I'll go ahead and make one anyway. If a dog has only been involved in a single biting incident, the chances are that future occurrences can be prevented; on the other hand, if there has been a pattern of biting incidents over a period of time, the prognosis becomes less favourable. That's why it's important to seek qualified help at the first sign of any aggression in your pet. Bear in mind that the dog behaviour business in Ontario, and to my knowledge, in the rest of Canada, is completely unregulated. Therefore, anyone can say or do anything they want, no matter how counterproductive or even harmful it may be.

So, I recommend that anyone experiencing a potentially serious behaviour problem with their dog (like aggression) should contact their veterinarian for advice and a referral to a qualified practitioner in their area. This should be done with expediency since one thing is relatively certain: once it has surfaced, the phenomenon of canine aggression will not go away on its own without appropriate intervention.

Kerry Vinson has a BA in Psychology and has studied animal learning and behaviour modification. He holds a certificate in canine behaviour from Cornell University and has completed the courses in canine behaviour at Kansas State. He has written numerous articles for veterinary publications and give lectures and seminars at colleges. He has been designated an Expert Witness on canine behaviour by the Province of Ontario. Please forward any questions to Kerry at Animal Behaviour Consultants (kvinson@consultant.com) or to Canadian Association Publishers, PO Box 90510, 230 Markham Road, Scarborough, ON M1J 3N7

*The foregoing article appeared in the Summer 2005 edition of **Pets Quarterly***