

ASK THE EXPERTS

The Dog Behaviourist

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Do you have any information on “fear-biting” dogs? My German Shepherd is fine with people until they turn their back on him to leave. He then does two quick bites, not breaking skin, but leaving huge bruises.

From the minimal information included with your question, I would have to say that fear aggression may not be the problem. Please keep in mind that canine aggression is a complex, multi-factorial phenomenon that can be due to more than one motivating cause.

Generally speaking, dogs that engage in fear biting do not go out of their way to pursue people and attack them. An accurate diagnosis can only be made by thoroughly analyzing a dog’s behavioural history and by correctly interpreting their body language during an aggressive incident.

That being said, it sounds as if your dog is trying to be assertive by attempting to control the environment around him and regulate the behaviour of the people in it. Over the years, I have treated many dogs who have tried to control a situation as you have described, and they have tended to be more dominant than fearful. I would need to know much more information about your dog’s behaviour in other circumstances before I would be able to say if he fits into this profile.

It is crucial to obtain an accurate diagnosis for a behaviour problem, like aggression before proceeding with a treatment plan. I do want to stress to you than you can have a major problem with a large dog like a German Shepherd that has shown

any signs of aggression. The scenario that you have described could become much more serious in the future if the intensity of your dog’s bite increases, which it probably will. I suggest you talk this situation over immediately with your veterinarian and obtain a referral to a qualified behaviourist in your area who has experience dealing with canine aggression.

For additional information on dog bite prevention, I have come across an excellent website, www.doggonesafe.com, which you may want to visit. Although much of the content of this website is geared to dogs and children, the same principles of preventing dog bites are applicable to adults. Also, there is an article that I wrote a few years ago entitled “*Understanding Canine Aggression*” which may be helpful for you to read. This article can be accessed through the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies website, www.cfhs.ca. Click on “Animal Info: Cats and Dogs”, then “Dog Bite Prevention”.

As I’m sure you are aware, since the internet is totally unregulated, anyone can say whatever they want, and there is certainly some bad advise out there on dog aggression. That’s why it is important to get valid information on this subject from recognized organizations like the two that I have mentioned. I hope that you will be able to address your dog’s behaviour as soon as possible.

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

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