

Pamela Dennison (c) 2016

What's in a label?

There seems to be a big push lately for labels for each type of aggression; dominance aggression, fear aggression, idiopathic (which actually means that the person giving out the “diagnosis” has no idea as to why the dog is aggressive) aggression, inter-animal aggression, pain aggression, play aggression, predatory aggression, territorial aggression, food-related aggression, maternal aggression, and possessive aggression. I feel that while these labels may be important to the owner on some level; knowing the name of the “disease” may make you feel better, what is really more important is not the label itself, but knowing exactly what triggers your dog to aggress and exactly what behaviors your dog is presenting. It may be people, dogs or other animals, the food bowl, tactile (touching), guarding objects, territory or people. Can you see how much easier it is to just define what your dog reacts to, rather than seeking out words that don't help you rectify the issues that most of us have to look up in the dictionary?

Oftentimes, the label itself becomes too complicated and confusing for understanding or perhaps your dog doesn't exactly fit into those categories and thus the treatment may get bogged down. In addition, once the “diagnosis” is given, the owner may then feel that the behavior is incurable and thus can't be changed. Then they give up completely by either euthanizing the dog or dumping him in an unsuspecting shelter.



When I take on a new client, I always ask them to write down exactly what their dog's issues are, what they've tried to do to rectify the problem(s), what's worked and what hasn't. Oftentimes, when they write it down, it helps to coalesce it in their own mind and they start to think, really think about what behaviors need to be addressed. In addition, when they actually see on paper what hasn't worked, they stop doing those (usually) punitive tactics and are then more receptive to do what will help solve their problems.

What Are The Issues?

The following are some examples of different things human aggressive dogs may find scary:

- Eye contact from a stranger
- Body parts, hands, legs or feet moving in weird or even normal ways (such as reaching out to pet the dog) or leaning over
- Loud sounds from people
- People coming up from behind
- Large groups of people
- Small groups of people
- Men (especially those with facial hair or wearing hats)
- Women
- Kids on bikes or skateboards
- People in a training building (such as during a group class)

The following are some examples of different things a dog aggressive dog may find scary:

- Another dog looking at them
- Another dog running or chasing something, such as a ball or toy
- Another dog barking, lunging or pulling on leash
- Large groups of other dogs
- Small groups of other dogs
- Dogs getting too close, either outside or inside a training building
- Certain breeds of dogs

O Certain sexes of dogs

Your dog may have other issues, such as:

O Accepting tactile (touching) or any other grooming/handling issues

O People, dogs, cars, kids going past your fence line

O Aggression on leash, but he is fine off leash (more commonly called “leash aggression”)

O Being afraid of certain inanimate objects

Say your dog is human aggressive, not accepting of grooming (even from you), and bulky winter coats.

Let’s break this down even more. Ask yourself—exactly how and in what situations is he aggressive toward people? Is it large groups of people, or only one person that he can focus onto? Is it direct contact (touching), direct eye contact, fast moving people, kids, loud noises, or moving body parts? Is he aggressive off leash, on leash, through a fence, up close (define how close), at home, away from home, far away (define far away), or people that come out of nowhere? What part of grooming is he sensitive about? Nails, shaving, ear cleaning, scissoring around his face or legs, or hind end brushing? Is he afraid of you leaning over him, being on the table, or on the floor? Is he afraid of men, women or kids wearing the coat? Does he aggress even if familiar people that he likes wear the coat?

Say your dog is dog aggressive, afraid of the garbage truck and flags. Let’s break this scenario down. Is he aggressive toward one dog, many dogs, at what distance? Does he aggress at neutered or intact male dogs, spayed or intact female dogs, puppies? Is he more aggressive when he is on leash or off leash, behind a barrier, in his own yard, away from home, when dogs come straight up to him, from behind him, or any particular breed(s) of dogs? What is the other dog doing when he reacts? Are they playing, lunging, barking, chasing or minding their own business? Is your dog afraid of the noise, sight or movement of the garbage truck or the sound or movement of the flag?

The generic terms, “human aggressive” or “dog aggressive” or even the labels some people like to give out, are really so limiting. Do you see how much more information you can uncover, just by breaking down each issue into its exact components? You must do this, otherwise you may be inadvertently setting your dog up to aggress because you haven’t defined and recognized each distinct problem in its entirety. Such a log sheet can look like this:

Date:

Things my dog aggresses at:

Men Women Kids

(define: walking, running, on bikes, skateboards, swimming, playing, etc)

Men in hats Men with beards Moving body parts Direct Contact

Grooming (define:)

People walking People running/jogging People coming up from behind

Mail or UPS person People on the other side of a fence or barrier

Other : _____

Direct eye contact from a dog Certain breed(s) of dogs (list)

Male dogs Female dogs Dogs running Dogs walking Dogs playing Dogs

coming up to crate Dogs approaching head on On leash Off leash Puppies

Other : _____

Inanimate objects:

coats sunglasses hats gloves boots umbrellas playground equipment

stuffed animals drainpipes manhole covers papers blowing in the wind

loud noises trucks water (bath, lake or river) gravel ice pots and pans

dropping thunder shopping carts loud music

other : _____

Once you have examined the ins and outs of your dog's issues and written them down, you now have a place to start in addressing them. You will be incorporating your new-found foundation behaviors into each context and you'll start to see progress if you continue to move slowly through the desensitization process. In order to cope with your dog in the real world, you must have an intimate understanding of his specific triggers.