



## Working out who is top dog

Who rules the roost in your house? PetCare's **Jenny Moffett** talks to veterinary behaviour specialist **Orla Doherty** about links between status conflict and aggression in dogs.

Dogs are sharing a greater part of our lives than ever before. They live in our homes and contribute to the fun of family life – some even cosy up next to us in bed! But, with plenty of stories in the news about dog attacks and so-called 'dangerous breeds', should we be worried about that closeness? Is man's best friend as far removed from his wolf cousin as we would like to think? Here, we talk to veterinary behaviour specialist Orla Doherty about what goes on inside those doggy minds.

**PC:** So Orla, what sort of behavioural problems do you see at vet clinics?

**OD:** The most common problem that we see is that of dogs experiencing conflict about status, which can emerge in a variety of forms. The most common form is aggression directed at the owners. This usually manifests itself when the owner goes to impose control over the dog – for example, by moving the dog off the furniture or going to put him outside. In those cases, very often, the dog will growl at or bite the owner.

Usually this isn't out of the blue – there will have been an escalation of initially lower levels of aggression. However, eventually the owners will get worried once the dog has started to growl or snap at them. It depends a lot on the tolerance of the owners but I have seen a lot of couples who have coped with the problem for a long period of time – maybe years – until they





When young children play near dogs this can be a "volatile situation" with a very high risk of a dog nipping

find out they're expecting a baby and they then become very concerned.

**PC: How can we prevent dogs from experiencing this status conflict?**

**OD:** Firstly, don't allow the dog to control interactions, movements or activities. Be aware that when the dog comes up to you and looks for a game or treat, or for a door to be opened, he is controlling that interaction. If an owner allows that control to take place, then the dog will get signals on a frequent basis that he is in control.

Secondly, having dogs up on furniture regularly is awarding them a very privileged position. Allowing dogs to sit on the owner's lap is a particularly potent position and I would not recommend it. If the owners want a bit of cuddle contact with the dog then I would advise them to sit on the floor, have that contact and then to return to their higher position in the seat.

Thirdly, owners should put in place a little bit of basic obedience work – using rewards not punishment so that it's interesting and rewarding for dog and owner alike. By doing that, and putting the commands that have been learned into use, the dog is encouraged to see the owner as the person in charge and that again reinforces where he fits into the hierarchy.

**PC: What happens if a dog bites without warning?**

**OD:** The most common cause of a dog biting out of the blue is fear, not status conflict. If a dog has been startled, he reacts purely out of self-defence. But, unfortunately, if a dog reacts aggressively once, he quickly learns that this appears to be successful behaviour. For example, if a child gets too physical with a dog and he snaps, then the child backs away and the dog learns that that behaviour has worked. So, where that behaviour may have initially been a fear aggression, a learned component to it quickly develops. This can escalate very quickly so that the dog becomes more and more confident in their aggression. It is important that such behaviour is not ignored by the owner.

**PC: Dog attacks on children appear frequently in the news – why does this happen?**

**OD:** Firstly, investigations on some of the lethal dog attacks that have taken place have shown that the type of aggression shown by the dog may have been predatory. It is thought that the dog may not have recognised that this little person is actually a human being. A lot of the attacks seem to take place when a child is making high-pitched noise – noise that the dog may not recognise as being a human sound. It is thus a very major concern that dogs are socialised with newborn infants or young children.

Another time of concern is when a child becomes a toddler and is more mobile. At this age, children are now standing at eye level with the dog or can approach the dog when he's in bed or near his food bowl. If the dog has initially perceived this pack member as ranking beneath them in the hierarchy – because the child isn't very fast or powerful – then at some





stage the dog may feel the need to reassert himself and that's a risk period.

**PC: How do we prevent dog attacks on children?**

**OD:** So, in order to try and prevent attacks, I would recommend that owners introduce the child, as soon as he or she is old and coordinated enough, to helping with simple management tasks involving the dog. Examples include holding the end of the lead when walking, or holding the brush along with the owner when brushing. Obviously though, the parent needs to closely supervise all contact. When the child is old enough, he or she can learn to use simple commands and to reward the dog – in this way the dog sees the child as in control. It is important, however, that the parents are seen by the dog very clearly to have a high status.

Birthday parties or family gatherings are another important point of control. When you have young children playing, with a dog or dogs present, that can be a highly exciting and volatile situation. There are children running round, there's food and high energy. Dogs, particularly young ones, want to join in and get excited and there's a very high risk of a dog in this state nipping. It may be just a playful or partly nervous reaction, but it is a serious event as a child could be seriously injured. Again it's a situation I have come across where the dog has seemed absolutely perfect but on the day of a christening or a child's birthday party it has bitten somebody. I would say to owners to put the dog away at times like that – don't expose your dog or yourself to what may go wrong in that scenario.

When it comes to aggression problems in general I would say: "Don't sit and wait to see what happens." Take precautions in advance so these things don't go badly wrong – once a biting incident happens it's a very serious situation.

*Veterinary surgeon Orla Doherty MVB MSc is a specialist in animal behaviour. She holds three clinics in Dublin – at the University Veterinary Hospital in Belfield, Sandymount Pet Hospital and O Scanail Veterinary Hospital, Swords. Originally from Inishowen, Co. Donegal, Orla now lives in Navan, Co. Meath with rescue dog Billy and her two horses Roxy and Sally. Orla can be contacted on 087 264 1762.*

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