

DOGS CAN BECOME AGGRESSIVE FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS

Many owners miss the warning signs that, if acted on, could prevent attacks -

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It's becoming a cliché, but many dog owners claim to be surprised when their dogs attack, especially when it results in severe injury. 'Bully breeds' like pit bulls and American bulldogs in particular are often portrayed in the media as unpredictable loaded weapons that can go off without warning.



GETTY IMAGES Scier law states that if a dog has a history of aggression and bites again, the owner can be found negligent and liable for the physical and emotional damage caused.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scier>

Some dog owners inadvertently fuel this perception. It's not unusual to hear a distraught owner insist that their beloved family pet has never been aggressive before, and that an attack occurred out of the blue.

But, can this actually happen? Can the sweet family pet suddenly erupt into an aggressive attack? Or, is there more to it?

There are, in reality, a range of medical problems that can cause the happy-go-lucky family pet to suddenly become aggressive. A dog that is injured, in extreme pain or neurologically impaired (such as due to toxicity, seizures, or diseases of the central nervous system, like rabies), can experience sudden and intense outbursts of aggression. Yogi, the Richmond Rottweiler dog who bit a woman more than 100 times last December might have been an example of this. It was alleged that Yogi, portrayed by his owner as the archetypal family pet, had ingested recreational drugs that led to toxicity and hence a sudden surge of aggression. Although these situations are few and far between, it can and does happen.

But, unless there is an underlying medical cause, owners of these ‘misfiring dogs’ are either missing something, or not telling the whole truth.

Scienter law applies to dog attacks and an owner’s liability for their dog’s aggressive actions. In effect, if a dog has a history of aggression and bites again, the owner can potentially be found negligent and liable for the physical and emotional damage caused. It’s not too far reaching to speculate that this provides impetus for owners to declare no prior knowledge of their dog’s aggressiveness in the aftermath of an attack.

The misfiring dog argument not only seeks to evade civil legal repercussions, but undoubtedly, it also saves face, avoiding owners the embarrassment of admitting that they screwed up by failing to take the necessary precautions to avoid the same thing happening again.

But, not every owner is this dishonest, and in a vast number of cases, many people simply miss the warning signs that pre-empt an aggressive attack.

Some warning signs are more obvious than others, and some dogs are more stoic than others. But, anything that indicates that a dog is fearful, protective or assertive in social situations is a red flag, and should be investigated.

Apart from the obviously overtly aggressive behaviours to watch for (growling, lunging and attempts to bite), other more subtle cues include — attempts to hide or get away from a stressful situation (the ‘flight’ reaction), stiffening (the ‘freeze’ reaction) and signs of a physiological stress response (including panting, trembling, flinching, startling, and heightened vigilance). A lack of loose, friendly behaviour, like a body wag, and spikes in arousal in the presence of people and other dogs can also be insightful.

If owners observe their dogs displaying any of these behaviours in social situations, they should be discussed with a veterinarian or behaviourist swiftly. A management plan, focused on safety and rehabilitation should be put into action. In cases where successful rehabilitation is unlikely, it may be that restraint and muzzling is lifelong for the animal. Better for the owner to choose to do this before an attack, than for the courts to impose it afterwards.

Although large breeds are statistically less likely to bite than small breeds, they can nevertheless cause significantly more damage when they do, and so it is argued that they need to be held to a higher standard. The current chatter among many professionals in the animal field is whether or not owners of powerful breeds should be trained and licensed to handle such dogs, something like needing a special licence to drive a semi-truck. It’s breed-specific legislation in its mildest form, but perhaps a humane and fair way forward. Rebecca Ledger is an animal behaviour scientist, and sees cats and dogs with behaviour problems on veterinary referral across the Lower Mainland. Read her blog at vancouver.sun.com/pets