Targets of aggression

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When a dog bites, owners, the community and veterinarians all worry about the risk of that dog biting again and biting others. But what are the chances that a dog who bites a dog at the park is in danger of biting children at home? Considering the target of a dog’s aggressive behaviour may help us understand the motivation for a bite and also allow veterinarians to give realistic management advice to help prevent further bites.

Who gets bitten?
Several studies have reported on dog aggression. The studies may be surveys of the dog population [1], reported to Veterinary behaviour practices [2, 3] or other similar services [4] or follow ups of dogs that have bitten [5]. Most studies separate aggression into those bites directed at the owner, those directed at strangers and those bites directed at dogs. Not all defined a group for dogs that were aggressive to other familiar dogs. One study looked exclusively at dogs that had bitten children [5].

In general, the studies reported that aggression towards the owners varied from 3% of 3897 dogs in a dog owner survey [1], 12% for dog owners seeking help from a free behaviour consultancy service [4], 65% of 98 dogs who had bitten children [5] and 38.5% of 1040 dogs attending a Spanish behaviour service [2] and 44% of 1191 dogs at a North American veterinary behavioural medicine service. Aggression to familiar dogs was reported by Fatjo et al as 12.4% of the dogs presented.

The dogs in the studies that were reported to be aggressive to unfamiliar people are reported between 9% and 35% of the populations reported [1-5]. When the studies considered dog aggression to other dogs, they reported aggression to other dogs between 7 and 16% of the populations in the studies [3, 4]. Fatjo et al reported an incidence of 34% for aggression to unfamiliar dogs [2]. While the studies did not separate or define the dogs that bit in several categories, most reported that some of the dogs showed aggressive behaviour in more than one context.

An unpublished assessment of 104 dogs presented to the Sydney Animal Behaviour Service in 2011 showed for the 93 dogs presented for behaviour problems, their diagnoses fell into three clusters. These were aggression to familiar targets (owners, household members, household dogs), unfamiliar targets (unfamiliar people and dogs) and phobias. None of the categories was mutually exclusive and being in one category did not predict being in another category. This mirrors the findings in Casey et al that dogs reported as aggressive to familiar people were not also aggressive to unfamiliar people [1].

Why the difference and why does it matter?
The studies show that dogs may be aggressive to familiar people, familiar dogs, unfamiliar people and unfamiliar dogs. Why does this matter beyond organising our data? The finding that dogs that are aggressive to unfamiliar people cluster with dogs that are aggressive to unfamiliar people suggests that there is something similar in the motivation for their aggression. It also suggests that the motivation for aggression to unfamiliar targets is different from the motivation for aggression experienced by dogs that are aggressive to familiar targets.
Dogs that are aggressive to unfamiliar targets may be acting from a fear of the unknown. They are uncomfortable with people or dogs that they do not know. While the studies did not report examining for fearfulness in other contexts, it would be interesting to explore if reacting negatively to changes in the environment clusters with aggression directed towards unfamiliar targets.

The motivation for aggression to familiar targets seems to be about control of resources. Many dogs with aggression to other family dogs are triggered by the presence of resources such as the owners, food, toys or by being forced into close proximity. Aggression to familiar people is often triggered by handling attempts or the dog being defensive of resources such as resting places, food, stolen objects or toys. Proximity to one owner may also be a trigger for some dogs.

What this shows us is that the advice we provide to owners needs to take into account the particular targets of aggression so that it fits the risks and experiences of the owner. So screening for all targets of aggression is important.

What advice can we give?
Targets of aggression are not mutually exclusive but probably indicate how a dog’s anxiety manifests.

A dog that is aggressive reliably to one type of target, is less likely to manifest immediate aggression to other target types. So a dog that doesn’t like strangers is unlikely to bite the family’s children but MUST be managed when visiting children are present.

All dogs are capable of biting but a dog that is showing aggression to only a particular target is most likely to react to this target. Managing the dog to avoid their particular target reduces the risk of bites, reduces aggressive incidents and helps with allowing over-reactive parts of the brain to calm and become less reactive. It also prevents needlessly isolating a dog and helps clients make an informed decision about their pet’s treatment and management.

References


