



World Veterinary Association Position on Control of Inappropriately Aggressive Dogs

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INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of domestic dogs will not bite people or other animals unless provoked. Agonistic behaviour (hereafter termed 'aggression') includes a range of normal canine behaviours, and can be shown by a dog of any breed or background. Dogs may show aggression that can be either appropriate or inappropriate.

A vicious dog is classified as any dog that is inappropriately aggressive and when unprovoked, bites or attacks a human or another animal, either on public or private property.

Appropriate aggression is a normal behaviour that can be exhibited when a dog perceives significant danger or threat. Dogs that show normal aggressive behaviour will exhibit **a complete behavioural sequence**, which includes:

- **warning** (growling, lip lifting, barking),
- **pause** to observe the other individual's response,
- **action** (lunge or bite if the dog has interpreted the situation or person as dangerous) and
- **release**

If the dog does not interpret the situation or person as dangerous, is reassured or "in agreement" with the individual's response to the warning, it could choose to end the behavioural sequence after the warning, without further action.

Inappropriate aggression consists of an altered behaviour sequence (no warning prior to the bite; no release of the bite; warning and bite without a pause between the two events, etc.).

Other indications of inappropriate aggressive behaviour include:

- the aggressive behaviour cannot be justified or explained given the circumstances (e.g. inappropriate for the context, not related to self-defence, or because of pain or threat to the animal),
- the frequency of aggressive events is excessive for the context,
- the severity of the bite is excessive for the context.

WVA POSITION

The World Veterinary Association recognizes that inappropriately aggressive or vicious dogs pose a significant threat to humans and other animals. The WVA recommends education of communities in responsible dog ownership as the most effective means of preventing and controlling

inappropriate aggression in dogs. WVA supports legislation by local or regional governments in this area, providing that it does not refer to a specific breed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The World Veterinary Association encourages its member organizations and their member veterinarians to prevent and control inappropriate aggression in dogs through education, promotion of responsible pet ownership, and appropriate legislation.

EDUCATION

Education of dog owners is the most important action leading to a reduction in vicious dogs in a community. Veterinarians can assist the public with correct advice on how to choose the type of dog most suited to the particular needs of the prospective owner. Early socialization of puppies with humans and other dogs and on-going obedience training are also highly effective. Veterinarians are encouraged to take the initiative in cases where pups are displaying inappropriate aggressive behaviour. A behavioral referral may be necessary to correct early or ongoing problems.

It is critically important for veterinarians to ensure dog breeders and owners understand the causes of inappropriate aggression in dogs.

OWNER RESPONSIBILITY

Owners of all dogs have a responsibility to train their dogs using acceptable techniques, and must use appropriate and humane methods of restraint for their dogs to ensure public safety at all times. Dog bites are significantly reduced when animals are not permitted to roam unsupervised. Permanent identification should be used to ensure that any particular dog can be traced back to its owner in the event that a dog shows inappropriate aggression to a person or another animal. Dogs must not be developed or kept for criminal purposes such as dog fighting, acts of revenge or protection of illegal activities. Owners engaging in such criminal activity often select large, dominant types of dog and encourage behaviour characteristics that lead to the development of vicious dogs.

LEGISLATION

To attempt to control inappropriately aggressive dogs, different countries have implemented various legislative strategies. Legislation and regulations should provide sufficiently robust mechanisms to deal with irresponsible owners and their inappropriately aggressive dogs.

Although some countries have adopted breed-specific legislative measures, there is no scientific or statistical evidence to suggest that these regulations are effective. To date, no scientific criteria have been identified by which it can be determined that a dog is dangerous by simply describing its breed or other physical parameters. Breed-specific legislation has been shown to be difficult to apply, due to the problem of accurately defining and identifying breeds and breed types. As well, legislation specifying breed engenders a false and dangerous perception that those breeds not listed will not be inappropriately aggressive. Breed specific legislation does not differentiate between individual members of a breed. Many of these animals may not be predisposed to displaying inappropriate aggression. The result is all dogs of a specific breed, regardless of their behaviour, will be subject to the same legal restrictions and requirement.

Legislation regarding vicious dogs may prescribe:

- Public movement restrictions and muzzling requirements.
- Owners of vicious dogs must attempt behavioural modification.

- Re-location to an environment where inappropriate aggression does not pose a threat to humans or other animals.
- Criminal responsibility of owners for the actions of their vicious dogs.
- Disqualification from future dog ownership.
- Confiscation of dogs with inappropriate aggression from owners who are unwilling or unable to control the animals. These animals should be turned over to a legitimate organization for assessment, retraining and possibly euthanasia by a licensed veterinarian if necessary.
- Designation of any identified vicious dog as being unfit for adoption.
- Mandatory identification of dogs identified as vicious by permanent means, such as microchip or tattoo