

Dogs, Cats, and Other People: Aggression in pups is not normal

by *Matthew_Margolis*

I'm currently working with an aggressive dog. His owner is a single woman who lives on a ranch. No children are at risk. The woman is responsible, stable and willing to work with the dog in a humane way for the best possible results and the best possible relationship. At the end of our time together, that's what she'll get.

The following letter from a reader describes a situation I'm not willing to work with:

"We have three kids 12, 11 and 11. We've had Great Danes before and have a 4-year-old female now, along with our new puppy, Romeo, who is 4 months old and weighs 80 pounds. He's rough on our adult Dane, he's been a bit rough on our cats, and we've all felt a tooth on our skin.

"Romeo is probably going to weigh 200 pounds and definitely has an alpha 'attitude.' He shows a strong sense of dominance: He growls at being told no, barks back at me, growls when being pinned to the floor and will stare into anyone's eyes. When taken by the collar, he growls at the kids and sometimes bites at them to get their hands off. It is difficult to discern the difference between 'puppy mouthiness' and 'aggression.'

"Most of his growling starts when being punished. He's been smacked (not hard) with my hand, as I was trained to do in years past. I've done a lot of finger pointing and pinning, but he'd keep growling, so I'd up the ante until he stopped. Everyone kept telling me I should never let him get away with the growling.

"The good things are: I can give him all those tests on your website; I can give him a bone and take it out of his mouth or his dish; I can have him lie on his back while I examine his feet and mouth; and he'll relax for a half-hour during puppy class.

"He's a sweet lovey-dovey Great Dane who will be neutered at 6 months. I'm concerned about him, and I'm concerned I might be doing something wrong."

He should be concerned about his kids.

The difference between "puppy mouthiness" and "aggression" is all in the growl. A growl is never playful. If a dog is growling or showing his teeth, he's warning you: Keep it up and someone's gonna get bit.

When we spoke on the phone, the man told me he grew up with aggressive dogs. He was raised on a philosophy of dominance, which is why he so casually admits to hitting, pinning, pointing and yelling as his methods of "training."

Romeo growls in response to this abuse, which is his only way of saying he doesn't like it. That's what growling is: a dog's means of communicating his dissatisfaction, of issuing his warning. Rattlesnakes have rattles. Dogs have growls.

Hubby received a lot of bad advice before calling me: His vet suggested Romeo might grow out of it. A trainer encouraged him not to worry, that Romeo just needs someone to dominate him.

I told him the truth: Aggression in puppies is not normal. It isn't safe to keep Romeo in a house with children.

How does it happen that a 3-month-old pup is aggressive?

When Hubby visited the breeder where he found Romeo, he met Romeo's mother, who promptly growled at him. Sometimes it's as simple as bad breeding. That's when you as a future dog owner must be vigilant. Keep looking. Puppies should be playful. Their mothers should be relaxed.

My belief is not that aggressive dogs can't or shouldn't be worked with. It's that aggressive dogs shouldn't live in homes with children. It's too risky. To quote the first President Bush, "Not gonna do it. Wouldn't be prudent."

Woof!

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