Understanding Aggression in dogs

To investigate successful techniques in stopping aggressive behaviour in dogs, it must first be understood why dogs act aggressively. Although aggression is a normal animal behaviour, when integrated in our society it poses threats to other animals and people, or the dog itself (Haug, 2008).

Aggression is ultimately a defence mechanism when the dog feels threatened. This can be shown in the form of warnings such as barking or growling, as shown in Plate 1, or as a physical attack if these signs do not ward off the threat (Fisher, 1991). Aggression may also be used to show dominance, or protection for puppies, and comes in many other forms, as depicted in Table 1. Aggression may develop due to owners’ ignorance on appropriate behaviour modification techniques, therefore provoking their dog through ‘positive punishment’ (Herron et al. 2009). This may be a common misunderstanding on the owners’ part, but its effects on the dogs’ emotional state could have a very negative effect, be it short or long term.

The author could suggest that aggression has formed through the evolution of dogs in packs, as the strongest more aggressive dogs would have a greater chance at mating with females and becoming the alpha male of the group, however in contrast to this, Bradshaw (2009) argues:

‘Many recent studies of wolf packs have questioned whether there is any direct correspondence between dominance within a relationship and agonistic behaviour, and in contrast to wolves, hierarchical social structures have little relationship with reproductive behaviour in feral dog packs.’

This statement suggests there is still much investigation to be done into aggression, but it can be concluded that it is a survival skill a dog needs when under attack or threat. With this knowledge, we can look into warning signs from a nervous or threatened dog to identify the begging of an aggressive state, learn how to deal with these behaviours to remove frustration and assure them of no danger, there by stopping any means for aggression to occur.

References