

# western view

no matter what breed or size every dog has the potential for aggression



## Don't stray from responsibilities

**D**OG owners have a responsibility to reduce the risk of an attack by training dogs well and keeping them comfortable and happy.

Just as we learn road safety skills to reduce accidents, we need to educate ourselves and our children about how to interact well with dogs, so the potential for attacks and injuries is reduced. Most dog attacks take place in the victim's home or at a friend's house, so it's important to teach your dog good behaviour in your own home by using language it understands.

Having worked with dogs and their owners in the western suburbs, I have come across a common problem in this area. Many live in older-style homes with a large front yard, which is a fantastic exercise area for your pet, but it's also the first place a visitor enters your property. I have seen this clash of worlds create aggressive encounters when a dog is left to patrol the yard and territorial behaviour is not nipped in the bud.

Dog behaviour is driven by survival instinct, which can often overrule a lot of things we teach them; but without competing with instinct, we can learn to safely manage and

No matter what breed or size, every dog has the potential for aggression, says dog behaviour consultant, **Kathy Kopellis McLeod**.

control our dog's behaviour. We shouldn't punish our dogs for having instincts, like being territorial about their front yard – instead we should learn how to read our best friend and manage the situation to prevent bad behaviour.

It's natural to want a dog that can protect us, but when dogs are expected to wear two hats – being a guard dog and aggressive towards strangers, but friendly towards people we know are ok – it makes for a dangerous situation. Many dogs will become confused with these mixed messages, so it's up to us as owners, to give them a straight answer and encourage well behaved, non-aggressive behaviour to help avoid injuries.

Leaving your dog to its territorial and aggressive habits could end tragically if someone enters the front yard or if the gate is left open and the dog chases a passer by. Imagine a common front yard scenario from a dog's point-of-view. Each day the postman

approaches, drops off the mail, and quickly leaves; so, if a dog barks and growls at the approaching postman, the dog thinks this behaviour works because it looks like the postman is scared away. So, when people come to visit, who are not going to turn away like the postman, this can make the dog's aggression escalate as it becomes more stressed by the situation. This reinforces aggressive behaviour. Dogs that are more inclined towards this behaviour should not be left in this situation unsupervised, because it allows them to get better at behaving badly.

Different breeds will have varying personalities and prevailing instincts, and those dogs who need special attention to help curb aggression and those who show a predisposition to be shy or on edge around people are more likely to react. These dogs are more likely to be aggressive, rather than those that just bark at strangers, but are sociable

when greeting people in their territory.

A well-behaved, happy dog is much less likely to become aggressive and the way to achieve this is to understand your dog's language. All the movements, postures and facial expressions we love, and sometimes hate, about our dogs are telling us something; so, by understanding these signs, we can have two-way communication and strengthen our bond with our best friend. Dogs communicate using four types of signals; body posture, facial expression, movement and sound. Being alert to these signs means you can have two-way conversations with your dog and you'll find out that they're telling you things all the time. For instance, growling is a dog's way of saying "if you don't act now and defuse the situation, I will have to do it on my own". Just like us, dogs' eyes can be very telling.

■ Kathy Kopellis McLeod has released her second book, *Watch My Manners*, which offers insight into what makes their dog tick as well as the A to Z of dogs' signs, how to approach strange dogs, controlling canine instincts and successful training tips. For more information email Kathy Kopellis McLeod at [chilkat@inet.net.au](mailto:chilkat@inet.net.au) or call 9345 5277.

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