

Doggie Discomfort



Dogs are social animals that are capable of complex social lives and behaviours. As such dogs come 'fitted' with a set of signals that they use to communicate with others around them. Because the dog's family may include individuals of several different species this makes communication even more difficult.

Dogs are very restrained animals and aggression is the last resort. Aggressive behaviours are energy expensive and as such most animals want to avoid using them unless absolutely necessary.

As a result dogs have developed complex and subtle signals to let others know that they are uncomfortable in a social situation in the hopes that they will not need to resort to a more aggressive response.

Even the term aggression is misunderstood. In terms of doggie signalling, what are commonly referred to as aggressive behaviours are more accurately termed distance increasing signalling. Almost all expressions of aggression in dogs are borne out of fear, insecurity and distress. Doggie signalling is often times very different from ours. At the root of every human bite is a dog whose signalling was misunderstood, misinterpreted or ignored.

Levels of Aggression

The word 'aggression' conjures up a picture of a snarling, lunging, growling dog in most people's heads. But the dog in this image is in an escalated state and probably started to ask for distance and relief minutes earlier in a much more subtle fashion.

Most dog aggression follows a similar sequence: freezing --> growling --> snarling --> air snap --> inhibited bite --> damaging bite

Each of those stages involves more signalling and varies from dog to dog. It is important to note that not all dogs will exhibit all of these stages. Escalated aggression (growling, snarling, biting etc.) will usually occur because the dog's earlier signalling is systematically ignored or even worse, punished.

What does doggie discomfort involve?

Dogs ask for distance and relief from a situation by using a combination of different body postures, positions and facial expressions.

When dogs want relief from a social situation they will offer the most subtle signalling first; if their discomfort continues that signalling may continue to escalate as the dog begs for more relief.

If over a period of time the dog learns that their polite requests for relief are ignored they may stop offering them and move to more escalated signalling.