
Options, Contingencies, and Proposed Behavior Modification Plan

Option 1: Management:

Identify all the triggers that cause the dog to become reactive or aggression and avoid them.

Option 2: Management with Environmental changes, training and behavior modification:

Avoid and manage the triggers until you can modify the environment, or implement the training or behavior modification program.

Option 3: Rehome the dog:

If the trigger is one that can be safely avoided and does not pose a risk to anyone or anything else, finding a new home for the dog is a possibility.

Option 4: Euthanasia:

If one of the other options is not viable, and the risk or danger to the occupants of the home (dog or human), or the community is high, and the quality of life is not adequate, this option must be considered.

Variables and/or Contingencies

THE DOG FACTORS:

1. Severity of Problem:

A. Bite Level:

Ian Dunbar scale:

1 = Warning; no contact

2 = Contact but no puncture

3 = Bite less than 1/3 the depth of the canine

4 = Deep bite more than 1/3 depth of canine

5 = Multiple level 4 bites; bite and hold; bite & shake; multiple bites at one time

6 = Death

B. Bite Location:

Extremities

Visceral body area

Prognosis:

Level 4 = Moderate prognosis

Level 5 & 6 represent a huge risk and euthanasia may be a viable option

Location of bite is critical. Visceral locations (inner upper thigh, crotch, groin, abdomen, chest and throat) versus extremities indicate an intention to do major harm.

2. Predictability:

If you are able to easily predict the trigger stimuli this improves the ability to manage the problem which increases the prognosis.

3. Controllability:

Maintaining control of the dog either verbally or physically reduces the risks. However, control is an aspect of management. The less control you have the worse the prognosis gets.

4. Previous Training:

A dog well trained and biddable is a bonus. Previous training experience and technique may influence prognosis. Lindsay Vol 1 pg 254: "Sadly, many dogs are subjected to a daily round of punishment and affection based largely on the owner's shifting moods. In general, the loss of control over significant events via the noncontingent presentation of appetitive or aversive stimuli results in reduced operant initiative and retards associative learning processes."

5. Trainability:

Food, toy, and social motivation are a positive indication of a more successful outcome. Hyperactivity creates decreased success.

6. Social Tendency:

If the dog wants to be with you and is socially driven is a good sign. Independence & aloofness indicate a lack of social desire and 'bid ability'.

7. Size of dog:

The bigger the dog is the worse the prognosis is for a reactive/aggressive dog. This is not only from a physical limitation but perception as well.

8. Breed of dog:

Reactivity: Some breeds are more easily excited and aroused than others. Some small dogs tend to be more fearful and can easily feel more threatened.

9. Arousal Level:

The Ease and level of arousal to stimuli is a factor that needs to be considered. A dog with a minimal warning system, or that escalates into a dangerous state of anxiety or aggression, or hyperactivity will require strict management and a carefully planned and executed behavior modification plan.

10. Resiliency:

Dogs that maintain an elevated level of arousal present a certain degree of difficulty in that they stay in a state of increased cortisol levels. Quick recovery from the stimuli that pushed them over their threshold is beneficial.

11. Duration:

If the problem has been ongoing for a long time and getting worse, a good prognosis is reduced. This applies to any type of behavioral problem.

12. Age & Health:

Hearing loss, visual loss, ear infection, oral pain, arthritis, injuries and compromised organs can all contribute to the problem. Chronic pain often creates anxiety (Geriatric Separation Anxiety) and a state of agitation.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS:**13. The Home:**

Apartment living is difficult. Constant noise and exposure to triggers are common. Vocalization from anxiety is more problematic due to neighbors. An open floor plan is difficult to block off. Lots of windows may allow for continued visual stimulation. Inadequate fencing leads to escapes.

14. The Neighborhood:

Living close to a school or park may allow for multiple triggers. Fire stations or hospitals near by may contribute to noise sensitivity. Close proximity to airport or air base may cause vibrations or noise sensitivities. Neighborhoods under construction may have unusual or unfamiliar people and loud sounds. Family neighborhoods may contribute to more children that can cause reactivity or increased stress.

15. The Area of the Country

Some behavior problems can be influenced by the weather. Storm anxiety can be problematic by itself but may contribute to the ‘trigger stacking’ phenomenon.

THE HUMAN FACTOR:**16. Children:**

The risks are extremely high if the trigger stimuli are associated with anything that children could be involved in. If the stimuli involve children and there are children in the household and/or neighborhood, the risk is significant.

17. Money:

Finances are always a consideration. If you cannot afford a behavior consultant or veterinary behaviorist (if necessary), trainer, veterinary tests, management equipment and the possibility for litigation, you are less likely to succeed.

18. Time:

It takes time to dedicate to management each day, let alone to work on treatment plans and behavior modification protocols.

19. Commitment:

Commitment to managing the dog’s behavior in every situation until the problem can be minimized and realizing that it is a lifetime commitment is vital to improvement.

20. Compliance:

Non-compliance within the family reduces the prognosis significantly. The environment in which the dog lives may contribute to the lack of compliance as well and therefore reduces a positive outcome.

21. Competence:

Leash handling skills, Ability to 'read' body language, timing during training, and capability to physically handle the dog all play a part in working with any dog, but specifically a dog with serious behavior problems.

22. Belief System:

The owners state of mental conflict bears consideration. Dissonance is felt when people are confronted with information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. If the dissonance is not reduced by changing one's belief, the dissonance can result in restoring consonance through misperception, rejection or refutation of the information, seeking support from others who share the beliefs, and attempting to persuade others.

23. Veterinary Cooperation:

It is recommended that the process and decision to euthanize an otherwise physically healthy dog for behavior reasons include the cooperation and of a licensed veterinarian.

Regarding prognosis: If you cannot maintain control of the dog and he is a level 4 biter, the prognosis is not good. If the dog ever comes in contact with children the prognosis is not good either. Even if the problem is not with children specifically, aggression generalizes and mutates quickly. Assess the risk and your abilities and commitment very carefully to determine prognosis.

Behavior Modification Plan:

Management of people issues:

- Muzzled and on leash when non-family members in the home.
- In the crate away from trigger stimulus if not muzzled on leash.
- No stranger encounters when on walks.
- Drag line when family home (in case someone comes over)

Management of dog/dog issues:

- Avoid doggy day cares and dog parks.
- Avoid walking your dog during peak walking times of day.
- Muzzled and on leash if around other trigger dogs.

Prevent Rehearsal:

- Do not expose dog to triggers until it plays a part in treatment.
- Dogs learn from every event and behavior becomes stronger.
- Aggression is self-rewarding due to chemical releases in the brain.
- Practice makes perfect!

Leadership:

- Establish safety history by increasing dogs' confidence (basic obedience).
- Stop all forms of positive punishment (verbal or physical).
- Provide regimented structure. Lack of structure creates chaos. Dogs need structure and consistency. Implement a "Leadership through Relationship" program.

Handle-ability:

- Convince the dog that handling is a good thing.
- Desensitize your dog to allow brushing, nail trims, ear cleaning, etc...
- Ensure that your dog allows you to handle their collar, put on a head halter, harness, Body wrap or Thundershirt.

Teach bite awareness/inhibition: (the amount of pressure the dog puts behind his teeth)

- Use "tug of war" to teach dog to take and release toys.
- Use play as reinforcement as well as a de-stressor.

Diet:

Use a quality diet.
Avoid corn as carbohydrate; use rice, oats, potato or barley
No colors or preservatives.

Mental Enrichment:

Feed meals in Buster Cube, Kong, or similar puzzle ball.
Operant Conditioning training: (anything the dog enjoys)
Nose games: (find it)
Forage for food.

Exercise:

Build up exercise routine slowly to avoid over exertion
Use moderate and longer duration physical stimulation daily instead of short quick bursts of energy.
Fetch (use two balls to keep the dog moving so that you do not have to chase it down to get the ball back)
Jogging

Medical Rule-outs:

Pain from arthritis, ear infections, injury, obesity, or other medical conditions can cause acute or chronic irritability.
Hypo-thyroid can contribute to aggression.

Non-confrontational Compliance Training:

Clicker training utilizes the cerebral cortex part of the brain.
Operant behavior gives the dog improved self control and confidence.

Behavior Modification Protocols:

Desensitization – Expose the dog to the trigger sub threshold
Counter Conditioning – Engage in incompatible behavior
Classical Conditioning – Positive association with perceived negative
Parallel Walking – Movement in the same direction at safe distance
Relaxation exercises – T-touch – Reduce stress
Click the Trigger - Mark looking at the trigger and reward
Turn away (BAT) – Reward for relaxed behavior by moving away from trigger

The management program and behavior modification plan outlined above is only the beginning of treatment.