

Welcome to Camp!
(Use your imagination! This handout replaces the pre-camp video!)

The dog's perspective on the camp experience:

Your dog is not used to being flooded with 25 other dogs, giving signals, making eye-contact, or challenging him or her. It can be nerve wracking for a dog. They may act a little testy, and be exhausted from constantly being on the lookout. They may not want to eat. After a few days of this, your dog will look like someone drugged him, or he's sick, or something. He's just exhausted from having non-stop fun (and stress) all day long, for several days in a row. This is normal. But please try to make it as easy on your dog as possible and minimize stress, by overseeing interactions with other dogs, and giving your dog "down" time (rest).

All dogs have a bite threshold. Some dogs are more easily provoked to bite than others. Various breeds are bred for their trigger points. Guard dog breeds are specifically bred for a "large" alarm trigger point (longer fight/flight distances). These breeds might start saying, "Who's that stranger approaching a mile down the road? He could be dangerous! Bow wow wow wow wow!" A Golden Retriever, on the other hand, has been selectively **bred** for an almost non-existent trigger point. They might say, "Oops, I guess I should have moved sooner—that axe murder standing over me, swinging the axe at my head is going to hurt me!"

Aggression triggers are cumulative. Think of aggression trigger levels as points. If your dog is agitated by the presence of a small child to the tune of 10 points, that might not be enough to push him to the bite threshold. If you add another factor, like a noisy room, which agitates the dog worth 5 points, that might put the dog closer, because he may be provoked to growl at 15 points. When you throw in something else that excites your dog, like the presence of a valued resource, his worry level of 12 points puts him up over 25 points, which for that dog, is the snap threshold. All you need is one more thing to get the dog excited to the point of a bite. If he happens to be on a tight leash, held by a nervous owner (worth 8 points), this dog is suddenly at his bite threshold of 35 points (10 + 5 + 12 + 8). A dog that normally would not be provoked to bite under any ONE of these bothersome "triggers", is suddenly sending someone to the hospital, because everything kept adding up (raw bone in a noisy room on a tight leash, with a child approaching). It helps to know your dog, and what worries, excites, or triggers aggression, and if you see a potentially explosive scenario developing, get yourselves out of there.

Aggressive displays are normal communication. The dog that snaps isn't always the "aggressive" one. Please read the "Do You Have An Aggressive Dog?" manuscript on the web site. It has the "Pretzel Story" from the camp video retold there.

Most Scout folks are very understanding of dog aggression. We know where it comes from, and how to prevent it, so we seldom see it. However, if one of us slips, and isn't monitoring our dog's environment, and there is a "tiff," try to remain calm. Notice I say "if one of US slips." We are ultimately responsible for our own dog's actions. If you let him have more freedom than his good behavior and trust-ability warrants, then SHAME on you. We don't want to see any dogs hurt, so keep your own dog under your supervision (whether on leash or off). A lot of times, a dog that is off leash is bitten by running up to a dog that is ON leash. The person with the off leash dog should have

been more careful, and the person with the on-leash dog should have asked for the approaching dog's owner to keep him back.

Everyone is responsible for their own dog's actions (manage your own dog's environment). Respectfully agree to keep your dog back from yellow bandana dogs, or anyone who asks you to "Please keep your dog back." These are not confrontational words. Please comply.

A tight leash means, "Don't play; FIGHT!" Try not to communicate this to your dog! Loose leash greetings, allowing dogs to go into the "handshake" position (nose to butt) are better than tight leash "face-offs" where the dogs are forced to lock into a frontal approach. Calming signals (and proper dog greetings) involve approaching in an "arc" rather than straight on. Calming signals include looking away, licking lips, lying down, scratching, yawning, etc. If your dog does not know how to give calming signals, it may be because he or she never learned to "speak dog" as a child. You can "manufacture" calming signals (looking away), by having your dog look at you (and away from the other dog), which is a calming signal to the other dog, and your dog will be less likely to be attacked by the other dog.

A good default behavior is to look at YOU (the handler), rather than to stare at the other dog, and get caught "locked" into a threatening stare with another dog, which could lead to "fighting words" (or worse). We call this "Manufacturing a Deferential Behavior", meaning your dog artificially shows deference to the other dog, by looking away (because you trained him to).

Your Camp Community:

Be nice to these, the new members of your temporary "family" (fellow campers). Obey Rules; they were designed to ensure the safety and happiness of ALL campers. Attitudes are contagious—is yours worth catching?

The #1 camp rule is to HAVE FUN! (But not at the expense of some other camper's vacation experience). In other words, everything you need to know to get along well as an adult, you learned in kindergarten. Share. Play nice. Don't be selfish. No whining!

Your memories of camp will be exactly what you take away with you—if you find fault with everything you experience, then you're going to have a bum time; if you look forward to each new experience as valuable, you're going to have a lot of fun, and you will cherish your camp memories for years to come! Camp will have good parts and bad parts—which will you focus on? Martha Washington said: "The greater part of our happiness depends on our disposition, and not on our circumstances." I found this out after ten years of reading camp evaluations. The good people always said good things, no matter how good or bad their experience might have actually been. The people with a dour attitude about life in general would write about every little thing that they could find an excuse to knit-pick about, sounding like they hated every second of their camp experience. I finally realized that we were running a pretty good camp. Not a perfect one, like all of the positive people were saying, but not a dismal failure, like all of the people with self-esteem issues would have us believe. I realized that it is somewhere in the middle, and all of the evaluation forms from here till doomsday, wouldn't tell us anything we didn't already know, except for who was feeling good about themselves, and who wasn't! So, now we offer campers a chance to offer input in the form of a

suggestion, ask for additional attention or voice a complaint in the form of a “care bear” note, and can give praise via the “compliment board.” This way, we can help a camper with his or her needs while they are still at camp, rather than hearing about complaints after the camper has gone home, and it’s too late to help. We hope you will take advantage of these tools to express any opinions that you have while you’re at camp. Because, if you “bellyache” to your roommate, not only will it not solve your problem (unless maybe the problem was with your roommate!), but it might make that person start to feel discontented, too (remember—attitude is contagious).

We all have a bad moment now and then. Women can be particularly temperamental. That’s right—we have those wonderful hormones to thank for mood swings, irritability, and a warped sense of what’s fair. If you find yourself having a “hormone moment,” just please count to ten, and resist the urge to “snap” at another camper. Realize that your bite threshold is already at a 20, just because you had to get out of bed this morning. Don’t let some unimportant event push you over the edge. And, for God’s sake, pack lots of medicinal chocolate. You may need it for yourself, or someone you have to room with...

Everybody has to clean up their own room and help clean up camp, before leaving. Scouts always leave things cleaner than they found them.

Procedures:

Announcements will be made during meal times. Drawings will be at the beginning of meal times (so don’t be late!). You must be present to win prizes! Monitor your own check-off sheet, and turn in the SIGNED bottom half of your badge form at your earliest opportunity, so that we can have your certificate ready for the awards presentations. Classes run for 45 minutes, so that you will have time to make it to your next class. Please don’t ask an instructor to teach beyond the 45 minute time period.

This camp will have additional rules, to help things run smoothly, and make things safe for everyone. Please respect the camp rules. Pick up trash if you see it, help out where you can and don’t litter. It’s the Dog Scout way.

[Here’s the manuscript on aggression, that I referred to earlier \(it’s on the web site somewhere—probably on the Index page, with all of the other important stuff that you should read before camp\):](#)

Do you have an aggressive dog?

I have dog camps where a few hundred people and their dogs come to learn and play each summer. Many people call me with the concern that their dog is “aggressive” and they are not quite sure if they should bring their dog or not. We screen dogs for potential aggressive issues before they attend camp. We have very few problems with dog aggression at camp, because we spend the first day talking about aggression. We now also have a video that we send out to prepare people for camp, so that we can spend more time doing things with the campers and less time lecturing them about how to handle aggression.

What is aggression?

What most people call aggression is behavior that is actually an aggressive display. It is a form of **communication**. Dogs don't litigate, they bite. Dogs don't have hands, they have mouths. I usually demonstrate the dog's need for aggression by telling a story of my own personal experience. I call it the pretzel bag story. This really happened to me when I was in my 20's.

I was at a college party, and this drunken guy sat next to me. I had a bag of pretzels in my lap that I was munching from, and he reached over and started getting some pretzels out of the bag. Soon, I found him digging to the bottom of the bag of pretzels (not looking for a pretzel), and I jumped up, gave him a "look" handed him the bag and went to another part of the house. [In dog language, this would be the equivalent of another dog ramming his nose up the first dog's but and continuing past the point of greeting. The dog with her space invaded moves away, and gives a look at the other dog that means "I don't like that—I've had enough."] Back at the party... this guy kept following me around. He just had no idea of how completely obnoxious and offensive he was behaving. [Many dogs are like that, too—they never learned PROPER greeting behaviors as youngsters, so they "cross the line" a lot.] Finally, this guy touched my face or somehow invaded my personal space that really made me draw the line. In my most threatening voice, I said, "If you touch me one more time, I'm going to take your block off!" [If I were a dog, you'd say I was one step short of my "bite threshold." I avoided this guy, I warned this guy, now I'm threatening this guy, and if I'm further molested, next I'm going to go for the "bite."] Sure enough, this guy thought he'd be cute, and to accept my challenge he reached up and "scritch" the top of my head (like some people do to dogs). That's IT! I hauled back and swung with all my might at his face. I swear you could hear my arm "swish" through the air like in a Chuck Norris fighting scene in a movie. I missed, and only got the collar of his shirt. But, he got the message.

What happened next was the strange part. The whole party suddenly silenced, and you could hear a pin drop. Everyone was looking at ME, thinking to themselves, "What is wrong with THAT bitch?" [If I were a dog, my owner would probably be yanking me back and punishing me for an "unprovoked" attack on the guy molesting me.]

Aggressive displays are communication. If the other individual (dog) was socialized correctly as a youngster, he or she will recognize calming signals or low-level threats, and back off. If that individual (dog) is not good at reading social signals, or disregards them, that person or dog is going to end up in a skirmish. The sad part is that many PEOPLE, observing this going on in DOGS do not recognize the discomfort, calming signals, or low level threats, and when their dog finally reaches his or her bite threshold, the person is shocked, surprised, disappointed, embarrassed or ashamed of the dog, and will often punish the one that was on the receiving end of the offensive.

What's WORSE is that some people, not understanding aggressive displays as the communication of information, actually PUNISH their dog for exhibiting these pre-bite aggressive threats to other dogs. The dog learns that it is WRONG to communicate and give this information to the other dog (or child), so they suppress the pre-bite aggressive signals. Then guess what they've created? They've got a dicey dog that

goes straight from being irritated to attacking and biting, with no intermediate signals to warn us (or the approaching creature) at all!

Some folks who are concerned about aggression merely have a dog who doesn't appreciate other dogs with poor social skills (I call them a "Jethro" as in that awkward, overly friendly doofus on the Beverly Hillbillies) invading their space. It is perfectly normal for a dog to want to avoid this type of contact, and aggressive displays are sometimes the only way to get it across to a persistent "Jethro" dog. A dog should not be punished for trying to remove another dog from its rear end in the only way it knows how.

Normal Dogs

Sometimes I have a hard time convincing the camper that it's OK for the dog to snap, if necessary, to get the point across to another dog. This is not overt aggression. This is not a dog that would "cross the street" to beat up another dog, just because it's fun. It is just a dog that wants to be left alone. This dog is not a danger to society. It is a **normal** dog with good communication skills.

Dogs with Space Issues

Then, there are dogs that think they are normal, but they are just a little bit more particular about who approaches. They go through the same aggressive threat displays (which are normal), but they do it at almost every dog, almost every time one approaches. This dog just requires a little more "space." Sometimes, in a camp setting, it is hard to always surround yourself with 5 feet of space, as a "safety zone" for your dog. This owner can request a yellow bandanna for the dog, which communicates to the other owners that this particular dog requires a little more space, and may snap if your dog gets too near.

The other people, however do not always notice or respect the yellow bandanna, especially if the dog "seems" fine and isn't making eye contact and lunging at other dogs all the time (he's just minding his own business until another dog invades his space). So, for this dog, I would recommend a little therapy.

These problems usually stem from fear, so I would strive to make the dog as comfortable as possible around other dogs. In addition to requesting a yellow bandanna during camp, I would be extra watchful, and be ready to intervene if another dog comes too close. Don't be afraid to ask the person on the other end of the approaching dog's leash to please keep him back. As other dogs approach, feed the dog with space issues, so that he will make a positive association with the other dogs' presence. I would try to find this dog a "buddy." Another dog with whom the dog is comfortable and can play well with. The dog needs to improve his social skills by interacting with other non-invasive, non-aggressive dogs.

This dog is safe in public and would be ok in a dog park situation provided the other dogs at the dog park were well socialized as puppies (stayed with the litter until at least 7 weeks of age). Since you have no way of knowing this, you might want to avoid these types of situations. Remember that aggressive threat displays are **normal** dog

communication. But, for the other dog to **recognize** this communication, they have to “speak dog.” If they were removed from the litter too early, their communication skills might be weak or non-existent. Therefore, when your dog growled or snapped at the offending dog, the approaching dog might misinterpret this information, and actually try to fight with your dog. [Imagine the pretzel story if the guy bothering me had no knowledge of social behavior, and out of nowhere I just tried to smack him for no reason—he might try to punch me back!]

I still do not include dogs with space issues in the category of aggressive dogs, and they can become Dog Scouts, because we teach the dog’s human companion how to avoid or get out of tricky situations that could lead to aggression. We call this managing the dog’s environment.

Dogs with Fear Aggression

Some dogs were poorly socialized (removed from the litter before acquiring some or all of its social communication skills). These dogs may be fearful in certain situations. I’ve seen dogs come “unglued” at the mere approach of a strange dog, from 30 feet away. This is NOT normal. Dogs who were not properly socialized with other dogs until at least 7 weeks of age will not be completely normal in one respect or another, and this is why we so strongly stress the importance of early and continued socialization (with the litter up until 8 weeks of age, with humans and other stimuli from 9 to 16 weeks of age, and with other dogs, people and situations for the rest of the dog’s life).

The fearful aggressive dog can not expect to live out his life without some major therapy. Sure, you could just keep him at home where he will never come into contact with things that frighten him, but sooner or later you’re going to have to take the dog somewhere (like the vet’s office), and he will be terrified and won’t know how to act.

A fearful dog has two main plans for action. Plan A is “Run away! Run away!” The dog distances himself from the thing that is causing anxiety (an approaching dog or child perhaps). If the dog can not get away, for example, he is cornered by the approaching child, or he is on a leash and can’t distance himself from the oncoming dog, he has to resort to plan B. Plan B is to get the scary approaching thing to turn tail and run away. To do this, the dog puts on his best display of overt aggression. If this doesn’t work, the frightened and confused dog may be forced to snap and ultimately bite the thing that is “threatening” his comfort level.

I would say that this is the best recipe for dog bites to children. Poorly socialized dog + Unrestrained child = Dog snaps at or bites child. Of course, ANY dog will bite if threatened sufficiently. Dogs with poor socialization require less of a threat than well-adjusted dogs, because, simply put, **more things frighten them**. To avoid this, don’t buy a dog from a pet shop. Get your puppy from a source where you know he was kept with the litter for a sufficient length of time to equip him with the **language** he needs to get him through life. And after leaving the litter, make sure the puppy has had an opportunity to meet SAFE, restrained children of all ages. Also, never let an unrestrained child around ANY dog. To a dog, small children are downright CREEPY! They grope and poke without invitation. Most dogs feel that they shouldn’t be subjected to such molestation--and they shouldn’t.

Unfortunately, a dog that bites a child is often carted off to the pound, or put to death. This is the easy solution. However, the owner will probably just go out and get another 5-week old puppy (who hasn't learned bite inhibition), and proceed to bring it home and keep it there (instead of taking it out and socializing the heck out of it), and history is going to repeat itself. It's not the dog that is at fault, but the dog gets the death penalty. Could it be any more unfair?

The fearful aggressive dog is going to require your constant supervision and management of his environment, but he can be helped with therapy. The therapy I would recommend is to try to "undo" all of the effects of under socialization by re-socializing him as an adult. Show him that things aren't scary with some counter conditioning. Teach him to show deferential behavior on cue, if he is unable to do it naturally. Introduce him to safe dogs, one at a time, in a safe environment. Introduce him to new stimuli in a safe and fun way, including lots of treats. Jean Donaldson, author of the best dog book on the planet (Culture Clash), uses a technique called "The Bar is Open." This therapy involves changing a dog's perception of a scary thing, by making its presence predict wonderful things happening (food). When the scary thing goes away, "the bar is closed," and the opportunity for yummy treats is gone along with it. The dog soon finds himself hoping the strange dog will approach, because it is no longer scary, but is a joyful event.

While these dogs aren't what I would call "normal," they could go through life without incident with the proper management of the dog's environment (keeping him away from things that frighten him). However, that would be like a prison sentence, and it would require a very watchful eye on the part of the owner. If this dog wants to become a Dog Scout, he will have to receive some therapy as mentioned above, so that he is not reactive around the scary things any more, and learns to trust that the owner is in control and will not let things harm him.

Dangerous Dogs

There are very few of what I would call truly dangerous dogs. These are dogs that WOULD actually cross the street to beat up another dog for the fun of it. I'm not sure what happened in these poor dogs' upbringing or genetic makeup that makes it "fun" for them to beat up or kill other dogs, but it is a gravely serious situation, and one that must be dealt with immediately.

I would define a dangerous dog as one who might not display the normal aggressive signals. You don't see any signals until the dog rushes over and attacks another dog. Therefore, this aggression is very unpredictable and hard to prevent. Predatory aggression often looks like this. A dog has no need to growl or act aggressively to his meal (prey), so if he is attacking another animal (as though it is prey) with intent to shake, eviscerate or kill it, you will often not see any warning signals. There will often be damage caused by the bite as well. This dog is not trying to just send a message with a scruff shake.

This dog is a liability to own. To save yourself a lot of grief, euthanization might be the only answer for a truly vicious dog. You can counter condition and manage the environment until you're blue in the face, but you just never know when there might be a

moment that you are caught with your guard down. That's when something could happen that you can't "undo." That's my personal opinion.

Some dogs **act** really vicious though, and we come to find out (after a muzzled growl class) that this dog just wanted to play with the other dogs, but had a really aggressive way of playing (and LOUD, too). One camper in particular had the trainers back home telling her that her dog was vicious and should be put to sleep, only to find out that the dog was basically nice, grossly misunderstood, and in need of a little socialization and environment management. The ferocious noise he was emitting made the owner frightened and she was transmitting the wrong signals to the dog. When she was able to be more relaxed, the dog calmed down also. This "vicious dog" is now a Dog Scout. He has toned down markedly, and his owner now has the skills necessary to control his rambunctious behavior. Plus, he's not frustrated, because he is now able to socialize with all of the dogs he was being pulled back from (for fear he'd injure them.) By the end of this dog's growl class therapy, this Rottweiler was playing nicely with a Toy Poodle. The owner was weeping tears of joy to find there was a very "normal" dog underneath, after her dog had been so misunderstood all his life.

If you do have a truly aggressive dog and you want to try to help him, consult with an expert in dog aggression. Brenda Aloff is our resident aggression expert at Dog Scout Camp, and she is amazing. She has people come to her from all over the country to get help for their dogs. Brenda has rehabilitated a wonderful German Shepherd that was destined to be destroyed because of many serious attacks on humans and other dogs (serious like long bone breaking and hospitalization.) Brenda adopted the dog because she could see a potentially sound dog underneath all of the aggression. Today, this dog has the demeanor of a service dog: calm, self assured and non-reactive. You have to read Brenda's book on Dog Aggression to get the full idea, but she basically taught the dog to "include Brenda in all decision making." With all positive training, Brenda convinced her dog to delay action for 5 seconds and look to her for guidance. That five seconds gives Brenda a chance to react, so that the dog doesn't have to. I have never seen this dog stare at, growl, snap or display any other kind of aggression in the time I have known her (5 years so far). She exudes self-control, and it was all put in place by Brenda, with positive training. (The online Camp Store carries this great book on aggression. Go to the DSA store to order your copy.)

Dealing with Aggression

I hope this information on aggression has been helpful. I do not claim to be an aggression expert. I merely pass on the information I have learned from others. Dog Scout Camp (or any dog camp) is no place for a truly aggressive dog. I hope I have helped you understand that some aggressive displays are normal and should be accepted, others need therapy and can be modified and managed, and still other types of aggression are dangerous and should be dealt with by expert counsel, rehabilitation and management. I also kind of lumped dog aggression and aggression toward humans together here, but you should know that there is a distinction between the two. We don't get too many dogs with "people" issues. If the dog dislikes the approach of strange humans, there is a rainbow bandanna that we have the dog wear at camp to let people know the dog does not appreciate human advances.

If your dog has bitten someone, it is a serious matter. Dogs have powerful jaws and sharp teeth, and can do a lot of damage. A dog is able to kill an adult human, and can easily kill or injure a child. We as our dogs' owners and guardians are ultimately responsible if our dog bites another dog or a person.

Because dogs don't have hands, they often use their mouths to grab things. My dog gets so excited when she plays with me that she likes to grab my arm in her mouth. She never squeezes. It's a very inhibited, open mouthed contact, and she means it only in fun. I have another dog that gives "collie hugs" by taking my arm in her mouth and just holding it. This is a sign of affection. Some dogs will grab you by the hand to "lead" you someplace, or pull gently on your clothing. These are not signs of aggression. Be careful not to "condemn" your dog for doing something with his mouth that he in no way meant to be aggressive.

Also keep in mind that dog aggression is normal communication of information, and if the dog merely snaps, nose-butts (a "punch" with the nose), or uses an INHIBITED bite (one where the skin is not broken), it probably had no intention of hurting anybody, and was merely trying to communicate his distress at being mauled. As our dogs' caretakers, it is our responsibility to prevent them from being "manhandled" by other dogs, unrestrained children, and ignorant adults.

Most bites, especially to children, could be prevented with proper management. Parents should realize that toddlers don't have the ability to use good judgment at that age, so they have to keep their kids safe until they're old enough to learn about asking first, and the proper way to approach a dog **if given permission**. Parents often fail to act responsibly, though. I've had to throw a body-block between my dog and an attacking unrestrained child on more than one occasion. I don't worry about embarrassing the parents. My dog's safety comes first. But these kinds of parents are rarely embarrassed. They don't see themselves as having done anything wrong to be embarrassed about! They just let their screeching toddlers race up to every dog they see, with arms flailing. Then, because I'm protecting my dog from being climbed on by the groping child, the parent has the gall to ask me, "What's the matter, is your dog MEAN?" I have to hold my tongue to keep from saying, "What's the matter, can't you control your kid? If you want him to live to be an adult, you had better teach him to stop attacking every dog he sees! The next one you encounter may well be 'mean' and its owner may not be as good as I am at running interference!"