

Akita Temperament, Revisited Parts I & II

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Akita Temperament Revisited, Part I

Since the series on Akita Temperament appeared in Akita Dog and Akita World, I have gotten a lot of favorable feedback from breeders and Akita owners. I've also had calls and emails from people who have problems with their dogs; so many that I decided I needed to brush up on my training skills. I've attended several training seminars, a couple of seminars on dealing with aggressive dogs, and completely revamped my training methods.

Most of the people I talk to about their dogs don't live anywhere near me, so my ability to work with them has been somewhat limited. I can explain some things that motivate the dog and suggest changes in their interactions with him to improve the situation. If possible, I refer them to a trainer and recommend books and videos as well as internet sites with information.

Unfortunately, a significant number of these calls come far too late. The dog has passed the point of no return, which is when its potential for harm poses significant risk to people. Where children and/or innocent bystanders are likely to be targets for the dog, euthanasia is the only course open to the owner.

Despite many years of dealing with people and their dogs, I continue to be amazed at the range of aggressive behaviors on the dog's part that their owners can justify as being normal, usual, reasonable and/or acceptable behavior from a dog. Even more discouraging are those who report that conversations with the breeder about the dog's actions reassured them that "Akitas are just like that."

In case you have any doubt, let me categorically state here that displays of aggressive or threatening behavior are not only not typical of the Akita, they are not normal and are just not acceptable. **DOGS SHOULD NEVER SNARL, GROWL, SNAP OR BITE MEMBERS OF THEIR FAMILIES, FRIENDS OR OTHER NON-THREATENING STRANGERS.** The one exception would be when the dog responds appropriately to a legitimate threat, which is rarely the case.

Dogs have a variety of aggressive expressions that stop far short of a bite. Unless you learn to recognize them, you cannot interrupt the aggressive cycle, which begins with very subtle warnings. These are messages the dog is sending you, telling you something is very wrong. If you don't pay attention, it is not the dog's fault. It is yours, but the dog may likely end up paying for your inattention with his life.

When the subtlest warnings are not effective, to make his point, the dog is forced to use one that is stronger. You would think that a bite would make the point, but many owners do not even recognize a full-fledged one as a sign of big trouble on the horizon.

Bites can be classified from I-V based on the severity. They are:

1. Bites that do not or barely break the skin, although bruising may occur.
2. One bite that breaks the skin and causing damage and bruising, which may require medical treatment.

3. Multiple bites that cause damage and bruising. Crushing injury may cause nerve damage and extensive bruising in addition to punctures and tearing.
4. An attack with multiple bites that cause extensive injuries that stops short of death.
5. An attack that is intended to cause death.

Dogs that bite seem to move through a progression beginning with a Class I bite. Most are euthanized after delivering a Class III.

Dogs bite for any number of reasons. Sometimes behavior modification and lifestyle changes can remove these and remedy the problems. Some dogs have unstable, aggressive temperaments that make them unsuitable for the vast majority of pet owners.

Once your dog has progressed to the biting stage, even getting help from professional trainers can be difficult to impossible. Many do not want to deal with the personal risk or the risk to others because no one can guarantee success. Even those who will take one on may refuse a dog that has a Class II history. In reality, the best hope for a dog that has some aggressive tendencies is to deal with him at the pre-bite stage; otherwise, the dog is almost always a lost cause.

Regardless of why he bites, a dog that has done so will be much more likely to do so again and the force and number of bites will increase with each successive incident. Not at all uncommon is the scenario where the dog, who has spent several years growling and snarling without ever biting, delivers a class I bite one day and then several more of increasing severity within a few months. Once bite inhibition has been breached, it seems to deteriorate rapidly.

So what are aggressive signals aside from biting? Many dogs begin by guarding some object or their food. They stand with their necks over it, tuck their heads down protectively and stiffen slightly when approached. The dog may alternate looking at the object and making eye contact. A dog that resists something like going in or out of a room or crate may stiffen and make eye contact with you.

Signs that a dog is more than unhappy are: stiffened or rigid body, standing on tiptoes; slightly raised hackles, direct eye contact (this isn't a dog looking at you to see what you want, but a flat-eyed stare); lifted lip showing teeth, vocalizations such as barks, grumbles and growls. A dog expressing aggression may also wag his tail, but this is a very different message from friendly wagging. It just means he's happy to think about biting you, not that he is talking and happy to see you.

Now if you've never taught your dog to give you back something he is playing with or eating, when he gets hold of a big, juicy one for the first time, you shouldn't be shocked that he does not want to give it up. A growl here doesn't mean he is a danger to all and sundry. It means you are not as alpha as you think. You need to teach your dog that giving something up doesn't mean he will be deprived. An accompanying snap might mean he is not so bite inhibited as you would like, either, which might call for additional work.

Issues for Akitas are often centered on pack hierarchy and sociability. Assertive behavior that may tip the balance over into aggression is directed most at children, especially those outside the family, and next most at people outside the dog's immediate family. Most incidents occur in a venue in which the dog feels at home. This may actually be the home, or it may be the car, a motor home or the grooming area at a show.

It is important for you to understand the victim of aggression may not be the cause. A classic example of this is the dog that dislikes showing finds himself in the ring weekend after weekend. This dog may be fine in a family situation or even in most social settings outside the home, but cannot tolerate the grind of serious showing.

Some Warning signs usually appear before the actual bite, although they are almost never taken seriously. Finally, he bites the judge, or less commonly, the handler and is disqualified from

showing. Putting the dog in what for him becomes an intolerable situation is the cause of the aggression; the judge or handler is a convenient target for the dog's frustration because he is a stranger.

Many Akitas find themselves without adequate leadership. Truly alpha dogs, as I've said before, are not bullies. For the right people, they can truly be a pleasure to live with and the right people may be those who understand he's the leader or those strong enough to be his. Most dogs aren't alpha, though, and are just not mentally equipped for the role. When they are propelled into that role, they handle it poorly, a situation that is not uncommon in Akitas.

Problems with these dogs arise when someone below them on the totem pole transgresses proper doggy etiquette. They may take food away from him before he is finished, try to move him from a place he prefers to be, or interfere with what he considers to be his duties.

Just as with people, when a dog is entrenched in the alpha role, even if it makes his life miserable, he's unlikely to accept a demotion willingly. Not many CEO's leave their companies to become janitors!! The trick with these dogs is to move them back into their proper positions in the pack without getting into a confrontation from which the dog cannot back down and before they become so comfortable in their role that they cannot give it up.

Please remember that all these cases deal with aggression toward people, not dogs. I think that aggression towards people and aggression towards dogs are two separate kettles of fish, although some overlap may exist. Our standard does say the Akita is aggressive toward other dogs, but I think it is there as a warning to judges and other exhibitors. Certainly no one should breed for dog aggression and it is probably one of the single-most objectionable traits in our dogs. That dog aggression can be present in some degree in any Akita is something of which we must be aware. Constant socialization and training are among the best ways to move away from it. You must keep in mind, however, that when the chips are down, heredity can overwhelm even the best training.

Temperament Revisited, Part II

My last column revisited some of the problems and issues I've encountered since the original Temperament article appeared several years ago. In it, I talked about some of the areas where aggression problems often begin with the Akitas and some of the early warning signs that a problem is beginning. Recognizing a developing problem is only half the battle. What to do about it is the other. You have to find a technique for altering the dog's behavior that makes him socially acceptable, and investigation will provide you with many different approaches to working with aggressive dogs.

The traditional method is for the trainer to use overpowering aggression to correct the dog's behavior, methods that range from collar jerks to hanging the dog until he passes out. While these methods may suppress the behavior, they seldom work forever, and if they don't, the bottled up aggression may be explosive. Even worse, some dogs become even more aggressive.

For these applications, I really prefer click train techniques. (If you are not familiar with these methods, links to a number of informational sites and ones from which supplies and videos can be ordered at www.dogwise.com. However you can adapt my suggestions to any type of positive reinforcement training. Click training has several advantages over traditional training when you are dealing with hostile dogs.

- It is non-adversarial. You and the dog are working as partners.
- Because it is cooperative, it doesn't evoke aggression, nor does it teach the dog to behave aggressively.

- Having an event marker (click) lets the dog know exactly what behavior is being rewarded. Dogs that do not generalize well or that do not readily repeat behaviors are less likely to be confused about what you want.
- Eventually the click itself becomes a reinforcer and a stress reducer for the dog.

The underlying causes for aggression are something we can only guess about. Further, different breeds seem to have tendencies to become aggressive more readily in different sets of circumstances. Most people don't depend on Golden Retrievers for home protection, for instance, but those who own German Shepherds and Rottweilers certainly do.

Akitas frequently direct aggression toward strangers in the home, particularly children. They also display dominance aggression in and outside the home. Perhaps all this aggression is related to a strong pack instinct where aggression arises from a perceived threat either to the dog's place in the pack or to the pack itself.

Regardless of the reasons for the behavior, the root of all aggressive behavior is fear. No one is aggressive to something that doesn't evoke it, although the reasons for it may be quite obscure. If you can eliminate the fear or reduce it to a manageable level, the associated aggressive behaviors will resolve themselves. You accomplish this by desensitizing the dog to the objects of his aggression.

How you begin to approach this depends on the dog's reaction level. Let's take children as an example. Obviously you cannot begin amidst a kindergarten class with a dog that snaps and growls at small children. Not only does it put the children at high risk, but also induces a stress level in the dog that is too high for effective training.

Instead, you should begin by approaching children, perhaps at a park or playground, at a distance close enough to evoke some stress response from the dog, such as yawning, discomfort, uneasiness, or a worried expression, but not so close that he comes unglued. For some dogs this will be kids a hundred feet away, some 10 or 15. As soon as you signs of anxiety, you stop and begin working with the dog, clicking and treating repeatedly until you see he is relaxed and confident. Follow up with some non-stressful, well learned bits of training which should include a couple of downs. Carefully watch the dog when he is down for signs of discomfort. If he seems relaxed and comfortable, then you know he is just that. Dogs don't lie. What they look like is what they are.

Work at this distance should be done a couple of times a day for a couple of days never exhibits anxiety on approach. Then you are ready to move closer. Remember, stop when you observe signs of anxiety and begin the series of clicks and rewards until the dog is at ease. By the way, as you get close to the children, you will probably have to tell them that they should not approach the dog under any circumstances because the dog is in school.

Once you get to the point that the dog can readily approach a group of children that are not interacting with him, you are ready to take the next step. You will need to enlist the help of some children and the first volunteers should be older.

While dogs recognize puppies as young versions of dogs, they do not equate children with adult people. I suspect that this is related to their odors, since children have yet to undergo the hormonal changes that characterize adults. Many dogs that are uneasy around young children are accepting of older ones. If this is the case with your dog, you should start your work with them.

Give the child a sack full of goodies and have him approach the dog, and as he does, he should neither look the dog in the eye nor talk to it. Instead, the two of you should talk in normal tones and you should monitor your dog's appearance. If you can put him in a sit/stay, you should do so.

When you see the slightest sign of anxiety, the child should pitch a treat so it lands in front of the dog. If the dog picks it up and eats it, click and have the child pitch another treat. You can repeat this several times. When you see the dog is relaxed, you can click and the child can pitch another treat.

After 10-20 repeats, you should down the dog, click and treat the dog yourself, and then end the session. If the dog will not eat the treats when the child pitches it, he's too stressed so the child should move further away and/or you need better treats. If the dog will not sit, the child should move further away until the dog will do so. If the dog will not down at the end of the session, he considers the child too much of a threat, so you need to increase the distance a little until the dog is comfortable in the down position and he relaxes.

Sessions should be frequent but short. Just as before, when the dog is relaxed at one distance, the child can move closer. Obviously the child helper should not always be the same person. If you can find enough children to help, you can keep the distance constant for a while and vary the ages of the children.

When you are sure the dog is accustomed to the children and they are quite close to the two of you, you can start having the child present the treat to the dog rather than throwing it from a safe distance. Treats should be presented in an open hand, palm up, rather than being held in the child's fingers.

The same process should be followed until the dog is relaxed on the down when the child stands close to the both of you. If the dog shows anxiety at any time, you should move back to the last step until the dog is relaxed. You want the dog to avoid thinking of the child as a threat.

For the next step, you can have more than one child approach. They can talk to each other, to you and may also talk to the dog. If the dog seems threatened at any time, have them back up to a safer distance and pitch treats. As you progress through these steps, the hurdles for the dog will become smaller and you will both pass over them more quickly. Still, you must take care not to proceed so quickly that you allow the dog's previous mindset to recur. If you find your dog reacts poorly only with certain children, you should see if they will help you with this technique, but you must be very careful that the dog is relaxed and seems at ease.

I think one of the reasons traditional training methods often fail to stop aggression, whether the target is children, adults or dogs, is that the dog associates the correction with the target rather than with his behavior. From the dog's viewpoint, every time the target comes into view, the dog gets punished, so the obvious solution is to keep the target away! The dog's effort to drive the target off can easily escalate from just wariness to biting, and in these cases, the reaction of the owner to the dog's aggression only reinforces the dog's conviction that the source of the problem is the target. This sets up a terrible loop where the owner's corrections only escalate in response to the dog's escalating aggression.

Added to this is the owner's anxiety at seeing the dog's reaction. Since this usually manifests itself as soon as the potential target comes into view, the dog easily makes the association between the owner's fear and the target and may redouble his efforts, since he is not only protecting himself, but his poor friend.

The objective in desensitization training is to teach the dog to be unafraid. This is accomplished by allowing him to confront his fears at a manageable level. Making him more afraid will not resolve his problems. Because dogs feel most at risk in the down position, you should always remember to assess his reaction when he is on a down-stay. If he is okay, and willing to stay down, then you can be relatively sure he is really at ease.

Desensitization methods are very effective for what are essentially phobias. However phobic fears are not the only cause for aggression. Pack position is quite important to the Akitas. While most Akitas are perfectly content with their lot in life, those that do not have a clear place will try

to move up the status ladder. They do this by challenging the pack members above them. They will also protect their position in the pack against what they view as a challenge

People unfamiliar with the cues that should tell them what the dog is thinking may still find themselves uncomfortable with their dog's behavior. Because they lack the tools to analyze their unease, they tend to dismiss it, hoping it will get better. Unfortunately, by the time they recognize their dog's behavior as a serious problem, it may be so out of hand that they cannot change it.

If you have been uncomfortable with some of the ways your dog reacts to you, even if it is something you easily dismissed or just thought about for a few seconds, you may well fall into this category. Please consider initiating some sort of training to make sure your dog knows his place in the family and what sorts of behaviors are acceptable.

To deal with dominance behavior all sorts of training methods are espoused. Some are supposed to be preventative. I remember one person writing about his instructions from a "trainer to the Star's dogs" in California. The idiot had convinced his client that the only way to keep his poor Akita from devouring the family was to perform a prescribed regime. The poor owner completely believed that without this "training" the dog posed a danger to his household, so the poor dog was living in the doggy boot camp from hell!

At the opposite extreme are trainers who throw up their hands and throw in the towel at the first sign of a problem. Their advice is often that Akitas have temperament problems and the best recourse is to put the dog to sleep. While it is true that some dogs pose too much of a risk to trainers to try rehabilitation, many others are salvageable.

The trick really is to demote the dog from his position without setting up a confrontation. Once again, I suggest an example from Corporate America – the lateral promotion. Done successfully, the person finds himself employed, but without a job.

I have adapted material supplied for what she called *Leading the Dance* by Sue Ailsby, a very gifted trainer, owner of Mind to Mind Training in Regina, Canada. If you think you have a dominance problem with your dog, you can begin this regimen to help the dog learn good social behavior, but remember that this is a non-confrontational method, designed to build a better relationship between you and your dog. It is a problem-solving tool for the dog that has gotten too big for his britches and will do no harm to a dog that hasn't.

You should do some of these activities until the dog understands his place in the household. Once he has gotten the point, these can be phased out individually over a period of several weeks. If you see signs of his previous behavior returning, they should be reinstated. Others, such as the food, exercise, and possession sections you should practice throughout the dog's life.

Leading The Dance

Leading the Dance--If you are dealing with a particularly difficult dog, you can do a refresher every six months to keep the point fresh in the dog's mind. Remember this is not supposed to be adversarial. If you even have inkling that the dog is considering biting you while you are doing one of these exercises, you should get help from a professional trainer who has experience with aggressive dogs.

Umbilical cord - You are the boss and determine where the dog goes and doesn't go. Put the dog on a 6-foot leash and attach the other end to a sturdy belt around your waist. Then, you go about your business without paying any attention to the dog. Watching what you do and where you go is his responsibility. In a breed as independent as the Akita, this forces him to bond more closely to you. Because you are the decision-maker, it also elevates your importance.

Eye contact - Direct eye contact is a challenge and a way of asserting authority. You need to assert yours twice a day. Sit down with the dog sitting between your knees and use a command such as Watch Me, make funny noises, or tap the dog's nose and then your own, whatever you have to do to get eye contact. Don't worry if he looks quickly away, he should.

Obedience - Twice a day, run quickly through an obedience session. Use whatever the dog knows how to do--Sit, Down, Come, Stay, Heel--repeat as needed. Train for a few minutes each session. Do NOT touch the dog to praise him.

Feeding - Ownership is what dominance is all about. The umbilical cord is about ownership of time and space. This step is about ownership of food. Food left down for the dog to eat at his convenience means the dog owns the food. Not only will you own the food, but you will also develop a feeding ritual. Dogs love rituals, and you are teaching his body to get ready to eat when he hears the beginning of the ritual.

Feed the dog twice a day, in a confined area such as a crate or the bathroom. Ask him if he's hungry, ask him to help find his dish, to help find the food, ask him again if he's hungry, tell him to go to his area or get in his crate, give him the food. As soon as he's finished, or as soon as he turns away from his food, or if he doesn't begin eating immediately, take the dish away, throw away the food, and clean the dish. (Note: If your dog is aggressive over food, you have more of a problem than you realize. Skip this step and institute a training method for dealing with food aggression).

If the dog is not successful at eating (doesn't eat his whole meal), give him half the regular amount at his next meal, until he is cleaning the bottom of the dish. A successful meal means he gets more at his next meal, until he is eating the amount that will keep him in optimum condition. The food must be high-quality and low-bulk. Water should be freely available all day. Give no treats in the food or by hand

Possession is 9/10 of the Law - At least once a day, handle the dog. Repeat the words "These are my ears! This is my paw! This is my muzzle! This is my tail!" as you handle him. If he fusses, go slower, and if you feel stupid saying this, that's okay, you can say anything you want as long as you talk to the dog gently and firmly while you are doing it.

It's important that the dog has a positive experience, that he comes to see that you will be handling him and it's of no concern to him. When he is completely relaxed and accepts your ownership, say OK and release him.

If your dog will not allow you to handle him like this without getting angry or getting away, DO NOT do this exercise. Do the rest of the exercises and use the clicker to teach the dog to allow this handling later.

Long Down-Stay - Do one 30-minute Down-Stay every day. You can watch TV, but the dog must be in plain sight and you must be aware of him. He can roll over, go to sleep, and look annoyed or bored, but he cannot get up or walk away.

I'm-The-Boss Down - At least once a day, just because you feel like it, tell the dog to lie down. When he does, use your voice only to tell him he did a good job, say Okay, and walk away.

Music Soothes - Make up a little song which includes the dog's name, make eye contact and sing it to him at least once a day. It doesn't have to rhyme, but it should make you both laugh. This reminds both you and the dog that life isn't always going to be this hard, and you do want to be friends when you're done. Here's Sue's song for her Giant Schnauzer Spider

*Itsy bitsy Spider ate the water spout
Ate the kitchen chair and
Some sauerkraut,
Chased a cat and chewed her ball
Went to bed
And said 'that's all*

Bosshood Is In The Eye Of The Beholder - Consider life from the dog's point of view. He sleeps where he wants, he eats when he wants, he leads you around. Any wonder he gets the impression that he's the Boss? Don't allow him to go through doors ahead of you. Don't allow him to go up or down stairs ahead of you. Don't allow him to lead you down hallways. Always position him or yourself so you are leading and he is following.

If he's lying down, don't walk around him. Put your feet on the floor and shuffle right through him (note you don't kick the dog, merely push him gently out of the way) - make him think about where you are and what you're doing.

When he orders you to let him out, take charge of going outside. Build a ritual around the door. Focus his attention on you: "Do you want to go out? Sit!" When he sits, you go to the door. "Want to go out? Sit. Down. Sit. Stay." Then open the door and order him out: "Okay, go outside!"

You change the situation so you are in charge of it. Keep the dog on the floor. Not on the couch, not on the chair, not halfway up the stairs surveying his domain, not in your lap, not on the car seat. Most especially, not on the bed! On the floor!

Don't leave the dog loose in the house or yard when you're not home. Free run of the house when the Boss isn't home allows the dog to feel powerful and in charge. Again, don't allow the dog to sleep on your bed, or on a child's bed. Dogs recognize the bed as a throne for the Boss. If he sleeps away from you, however, he will think that you own the bedroom, but he owns the rest of the house. The dog should sleep in your bedroom. If you can't have him sleeping in your bedroom (allergies, for instance), confine him to his crate.

Work Off Energy - Roadwork the dog 4 days a week. Start small, but work up to at least 2 miles a day. Many problems will disappear with no more effort than roadworking. You can jog with the dog, ride a bike, or lend him to a jogger who's afraid of being mugged.

Busy Hands Are Happy Hands - If you want to pet the dog, he must first do pushups - Sit, Down, Sit, Down, Sit, Down, Sit, Down - then you can pet him for a count of 5 only. He never gets petted because he wants to be or because he demands it, only because you want to and he earns it. Then you pet him for only a moment, and turn away with him wanting more.

My Game, My Rules - Give the dog only one toy. If he wants to chase the toy, bring it back to you and let you have it, throw it again. If he won't chase it, or won't give it to you, turn your back and walk away. He has two choices, he can play with you and the toy, or he can play with the toy alone. Do not, under any circumstances, play tug-of-war. When you can get the toy without chasing him or playing tug, pick it up and put it away.

Eliminate Hormones - Have problem dogs neutered. Some problems will solve themselves with no more effort than this. Not only will the dog be healthier and easier to live with, but your life will be made simpler.

Another hormonal problem that can affect behavior, especially in a dog that has a sudden shift in it, is hypothyroidism. This is a degenerative disease, so, depending on its course, signs are not

always present until the dog is older. Ask your veterinarian to run a full thyroid panel on your dog to see whether supplementation is necessary.

A number of excellent books and videos are available as resources. Among the best is a very simple book called *On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals* by T. Rugaas. It is very short and costs about \$10.00. I cannot recommend it highly enough. Several internet bookstores carry it, including Dogwise.com. Rogerson's video on the Dominant Dog is also an excellent resource, also available from them. As always, you can contact me about this article or previous ones via email (Sherry@sherob.com) or by telephone at 713/465-9729, (CST, Houston, not between 8-10 p.m please and never after 11 pm).

This information is here to help Akitas, but if you've found it useful and would like to make a donation for its use, you can do so by making an honor donation through [PayPal](#).

Any donation is sent directly to the [Akita Club of America](#) and divided equally between their funds for rescue and health research. Any amount is welcome.

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