



## Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

### PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOR IN DOGS DESCRIPTION, MANAGEMENT AND BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

#### **Description:**

Protective behavior occurs when an animal is defending one or more members of its social group from a *perceived* threat. Look for behavior from the approaching person or animal that the dog may perceive as threatening. This could be someone reaching out to shake hands, giving a hug, delivering a package, wrestling games between family members, etc. Protective behavior can be displayed with either defensive or offensive body postures. Dominance has nothing to do with protective aggression.

#### ***Defensive Body Postures:***

Body low to the ground, tail low or tucked between legs, ears back and close to head.

#### ***Offensive Body Postures:***

Body tense and upright (large stance), tail level with back or raised upward, ears erect and forward.

#### **Management:**

Discourage behaviors from people that could trigger protective responses from your dog. Try to approach other people before they approach you.

#### **Behavior Modification:**

The goal for treatment of protective behavior is to change your dog's expectations about what it means to have individuals approach his social group. Instead of perceiving these individuals as threats the dog should be counterconditioned and desensitized to anticipate and associate great things with their presence. Your dog needs to learn that the behaviors he sees as threatening are not, and they are predictive of good things.

For more information on treating and managing protective behavior contact our behavior specialists at 713-869-7722, ext. 187, or email [animals@hspca.org](mailto:animals@hspca.org).