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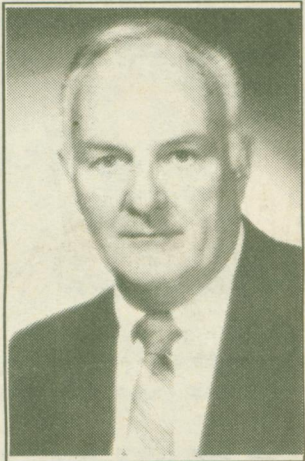


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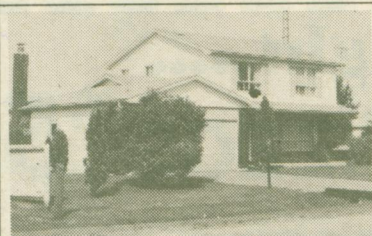
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Pet Patter: Aggression in dogs

By Liz Thurston, DVM

Recent reports of children being bitten by dogs in apparently unprovoked attacks have caused parents deep concern and motivated some to inquire if such episodes could be avoided. Although there are

instances where biting is completely unpredictable (as in an animal suffering from rabies or other demented condition), in most instances there have been clues in the past behavior of the dog to indicate there is the potential for biting to occur.

Pups or dogs that growl or snap when they are reprimanded, when treats or food are taken away or when they are approached in their bed or while eating, have the potential to become even more aggressive. They may bite not only in these situations but also if someone simply bends over them, extends a hand above the nose or head or stares directly into their eyes, just as a child would do in being friendly.

Dogs, like wolves, are pack animals. As a pet, the dog extends pack membership to the family members and others it is familiar with. Dominance in the "pack" is linear, there can be only one leader and there can be no two equally dominant members. Ideally, as a pet, the dog positions himself at the bottom of the pack. Unfortunately, some dogs have a very dominant temperament and will instinctively

push to become "top dog" over at least some of the family members. The dog then sees these individuals as weak and expects them to respect his wishes. When a person perceived to be below the dog in its hierarchy acts in a way that it interprets as challenging its position it reacts by attacking, the equivalent of fighting for dominance within the pack.

Dominance aggression, therefore, is more often directed toward family members. The attacks of a dominant dog seem unprovoked, fast and often without threat (the dog does not bark or growl before biting). In fact, the dog has interpreted specific behaviors as being provocative. The above mentioned hugging, petting on top of the head, standing over or staring into the dog's eyes can all trigger this aggression, particularly if coupled with discipline or conflict over a resource such as food, toys, bed or a family member. Children should be instructed to strictly avoid any dog that has a history of ever showing this type of aggression.

Territorial aggression appears quite different than the above

Continued on page 14

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