

In February 2008, the BBC reported that NHS statistics showed, on average, a 40% increase of people being treated in A&E following dog attacks.

This was over a 4 year period bringing the total to almost 3,800 a year. During the same period in London, the number of patients under 18 doubled and in the West Midlands it rose by 80%.

In May 2009, the largest world study on Dog Behaviour and Aggression to date was published by of the University of Cordoba. The findings ?

Approximately 40% of dominance aggression in dogs is associated with a lack of authority on the part of the owner.

There have been many discussions, debates and out & out arguments about whether dogs need rules and boundaries and owners who are their leaders or whether, as stated by the Bristol of University in its latest research, this is "old hat".

Using a sample of 711 dogs, the University of Cordoba concluded that the significant factors that contribute to aggression in the dog are; lack of punishment from the owner when required, lack of basic training and spoiling the dog.

The study also reveals that the factors that had the greatest influence over the aggression were related to the owner, namely how spoilt the dog was, whether any basic training had been done and statistically the most important, whether punishment was used. The results show that failing to train your dog, allowing your dog to bark at strangers and not punishing your dog when required will contribute to the levels of aggression; dogs that are trained properly, handled appropriately and are not pampered do not normally retain aggressive dominance behaviour.

The study carried out by Bristol University on dog behaviour and dog behaviour in the home was carried out on 19 dogs in the artificial environment of a rescue centre. The dogs used in their research were all neutered and all males; not a great cross-section of the dog population of Great Britain. The sample size of the Cordoba study was 711 dogs (354 males and 357 females), 594 were purebred and 117 mixed breed, which makes the Bristol study appear meagre to say the least.

The Bristol study and subsequent article (ScienceDaily, May 2009) implies, well more than implies, that dominance reduction programmes involve pinning down dogs, grabbing them by their jowls and doing the 'alpha roll'. This harks back to the Monks of New Skete, circa 1978, but that really is 'old hat'. Nowadays "dominance reduction programmes", or, more commonly, leadership programmes or rank reduction programmes or house rules / boundaries or even common sense, don't do any of these things

Modern leadership programmes that behaviourists recommend are based on common sense, although once more the Bristol study attempts to discredit excellent current techniques by stating things like "Dominance Reduction Programmes are detrimental to a dog's well-being" although this isn't substantiated with any facts and figures; there aren't any examples of which dominance reduction programmes they are referring to. There is a definite lack of substance to the research; you don't even find out what breed the 19 neutered Dogs Trust dogs were, or their age, and the journal appears to be a treatise on the semantics of the word 'dominance' rather than a rigorous study.

For those of us directly involved in dog behaviour, behaviourists/trainers/owners, it is reassuring that there is up to date scientific evidence to back up what we all know to be innately true, namely, that dogs need leaders and for those leaders to exercise appropriate control. As stated in ScienceDaily (May 2009) "approximately 40% of dominance aggression in dogs is associated with a lack of authority on the part of the owner".

With the introduction of the Dangerous Dogs Act in 1991 there is an added onus on us to ensure that our dogs are under our control and, as verified by the University of Cordoba, dogs need rules and they need the rules to be applied consistently.

As we seem to be moving into a culture that is turning politically correct with our dogs, rather than addressing our dogs basic animal needs, we need to ask ourselves "Are we, by allowing our dogs to live with us as friends and equals; with free access to furniture and bedrooms; without enforcing old fashioned common sense rules; contributing to the increase in the national bite statistics?"

For further information on the BBC report and the Study Journal by the University of Cordoba please follow the links below.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7264620.stm>

<http://www.medwelljournals.com/fulltext/java/2009/336-342.pdf>