

ROARING WITH A REASON

***What Companion Animal Behavior Teaches Us About The Role
Medical Abnormalities Play in Aggression***

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Medical Abnormalities That Can Result in Aggression

- Pain (e.g., arthritis)
- Seizure Disorders
- Cognitive Dysfunction (Dementia)
- Metabolic & Endocrine Disorders (e.g., thyroid, kidney, diabetes)
 - *(e.g., diseases that increase hunger or thirst might increase the chance of conflict over food or water resources)*
- Itchiness
- GI upset
- and many more...

Case Examples

Dylan

5 year old male Beagle

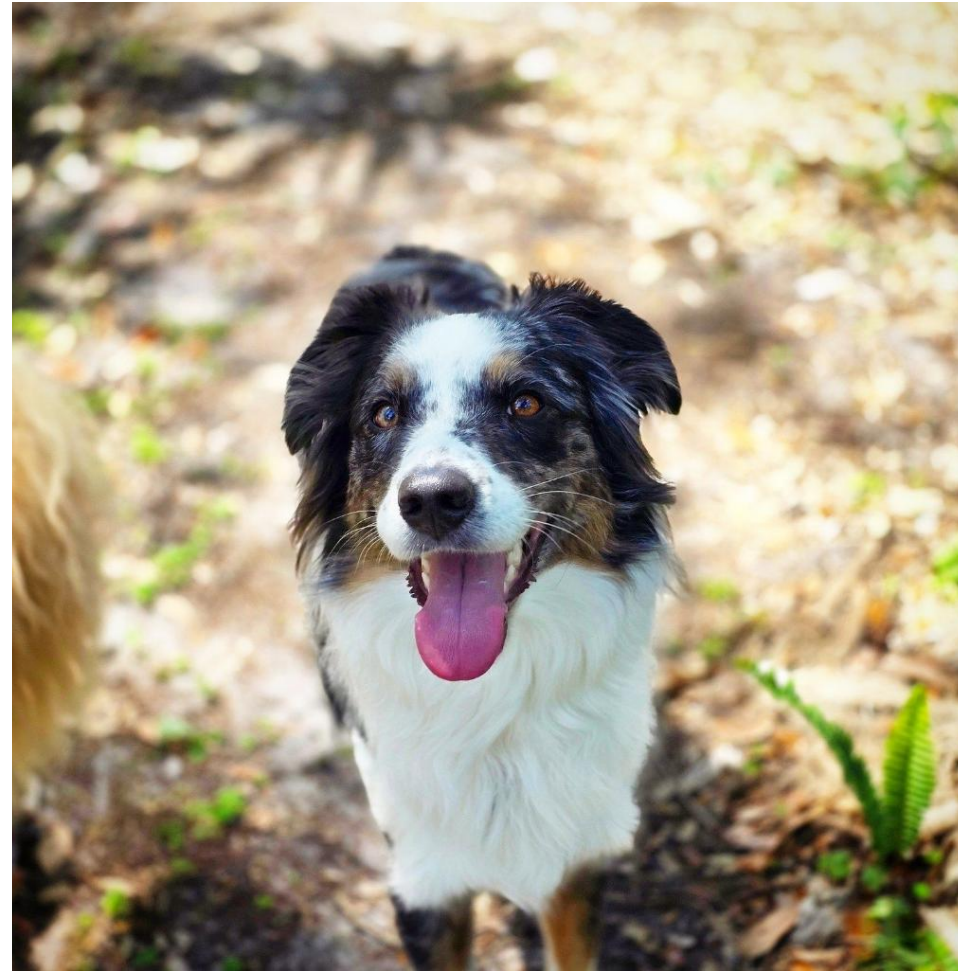
- Aggression toward people in the home, including bites to owners and their child's nanny
- Hydrocephaly, confirmed on MRI.
 - This can cause pain and predispose to seizures.
- **I suspected seizure activity**
- **DRAMATIC reduction in aggressive events once started on seizure medications.**



Franny

2 year old female Australian Shepherd

- Anxious dog with fear-related aggression and food-related aggression.
 - Has been aggressive toward housemates (dog and cat), unfamiliar dogs, and toward people
- Yes, she's fearful and anxious, **but she's also painful.**
 - “Sometimes Franny quickly turns and bites at her right back leg. Happens 3-4x/week.”
 - Intermittent Lameness
 - **During flare-ups (when Franny is limping, apparent because she'd skip steps) aggression is SIGNIFICANTLY worse**
- Treat the pain! Even if it's not FIXABLE, we do the best we can to MANAGE the pain and it's behavioral outcomes. **That's a big part of success in this case.**



**What does this have to do with
me if I'm not a veterinarian?**

Items for Zoo and Aquarium Staff to Watch For

And that should be communicated to veterinary staff...

- Changes in gait, or in how the animal shifts their weight.
 - *Skipping steps, putting more weight on front legs or back legs, how they stand up*
- Any changes in posture when sitting, standing, or lying down? (Or flying or swimming)
- Any changes in sleep/wake cycle?
- Change in appearance/feel of skin, hair, fur, scales, or feathers?
- Change in how food is chewed/picked up, or in speed of eating/drinking.
- Change in amount of food or water being consumed.
- Different interactions with other animals in the enclosure.
- Change in how the animal USES their enclosure.

Items for Zoo and Aquarium Staff to Watch For

And that should be communicated to veterinary staff (*continued*)

- Neurological changes and seizure activity aren't just about spasms (i.e., grand mal seizures)
 - Look for abnormal eye movements
 - Lack of awareness
 - Muscle twitches
 - Incoordination
 - Abnormal repetitive movements
 - “Staring off into space”
 - Hallucinations (reacting to things that might not be there... but take into account their senses)

Even if you didn't see any of the aforementioned items, some hints that you could STILL have a medical cause include:

- Sudden behavioral change, without another obvious environmental cause.
 - Could be brand NEW aggression
 - Could be WORSENING aggression
 - Increased frequency or intensity
 - Change in target of that aggression
- Aggression that takes place only in certain circumstances, such as:
 - low light levels
 - after certain areas are touched/handled
 - after certain activities

Remember to ask yourself...

**Could there be a medical reason
for this behavior change?**

**Does the animal just not feel
well?**

Tyler

9 year old male Vizsla

- Sudden onset of aggression toward people in the home.
- Not consistent with past 9 years of behavioral history.
- Given the **sudden** change in behavior, I **suspect underlying medical.**
- Recommended full physical examination and labwork with primary care veterinarian.
- Passed away THREE DAYS after consultation from previously undiagnosed tumor on spleen... suggesting the sudden onset of aggression was due to Tyler feeling sick from his cancer.



If a medical diagnosis has been made...

Adjust Behavior Modification Appropriately

- Is it painful for an animal to be in/hold a certain position?
 - Would a different substrate or surface make it easier for that animal?
- Are cognitive abilities better at different times of the day?
- Has the value of reinforcers (such as food) increased/decreased because of an underlying illness?
 - Or is eating painful now???
- Has a change in vision resulted in sensitivities to brightness, or a greater likelihood of startle/fear from shadows?
- Are other senses such as hearing impacted? Can the animal not hear an auditory marker like they could before?

IN CONCLUSION...

- Keep your mind open for physical abnormalities effecting your behavior modification plan.
- Providing detailed communication on physical changes is essential to your vet making an accurate diagnosis.
- It's not always as simple as determining if it's medical OR behavioral. Sometimes... it's a bit of BOTH!
- The most effective behavior modification takes all factors into account.

