AN UPDATE ON AGGRESSION TOWARDS FAMILY MEMBERS.

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During decades, most cases of aggression towards family members were considered dominance-related. Nevertheless, since the turn of the century an increasing number of specialists in behavioural medicine suggest that canine aggression towards family members would be mainly related to fear and conflict.

There are two main controversies around dominance in dogs: one, more scientific, related to the existence of dominance-relationships in dogs and another one around the practical implications of treating aggressive dogs following the traditional paradigm of considering the owner as the leader of the pack.

Some trainers and also some so-called dog experts still support the treatment of owner-directed aggression using confrontational strategies, like physical punishment, shock collars and the alpha-role technique, to name just a few. However, these techniques are not supported by current research on canine behaviour, could damage the human-animal bond and deliberately put the family at risk of being bitten.

Most experts and behavioural medicine international associations recommend the use of non-confrontational techniques and positive reinforcement to treat owner-directed aggression in dogs. That is not to say that there is no scientific debate on certain aspects of social behaviour in dogs. Recently, some scientists have pointed out that canids, including dogs, do show social asymmetries and dominance-relationships. In any case, they cannot be considered neither an expression of formal dominance nor a behavioural trait, which are in fact the two concepts that support the old-fashioned approach to owner-directed aggression.

The treatment of owner-directed aggression often includes adjunctive measures like castration and biological therapies. In recent years there is increased evidence that castration could be contraindicated in certain cases of owner-directed aggression. Regarding drugs, those improving impulse control, like the SSRIs, are considered the first-line treatment for owner-directed aggression, particularly when there is a lack of warning signals prior to an attack. During the last few years the

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