

Goat Aggression

I read a story last month in Countryside magazine about a poor woman who was afraid to go out in her yard because of a goat she had raised from a kid. Its behavior had escalated to the point that it would immediately go after her anytime it saw her and she eventually had to get rid of it. This may be an extreme case but it does give us a hint at how bad an aggressive goat can get if left unchecked. Since this topic seems to come up over and over we are going to take a quick refresher and touch on the basic signs of aggression.

Generally speaking, aggressive behavior toward humans tends to show up when a goat reaches the teenage years. With a herd containing older dominate goats, that is usually around two years of age. If your herd does not contain any older animals you may experience this behavior earlier, say around one year old.

Generally there is a fairly consistent step-by-step process the goat uses to figure out its place in the herd hierarchy and with you as the owner. Knowing those steps will let you see trouble well before it becomes a serious problem. I'll list the progression in general terms. Each goat is different and may jump steps or mix them up but the end result will almost always be the same.

- 1) The first sign you often see is a lack of general respect. It may be in the form of simply ignoring you while it moves through your personal space or not standing to allow you to trim feet or administer medication.
- 2) This generally leads to the goat getting pushy about getting fed or trying to get out of the gate when you try to go in or out of the pen.
- 3) If left unchecked the goat starts building confidence that it can push you around with out much consequence and begins getting more excited and aggressively challenging other goats when you are in the pen.
- 4) This play fighting gives the goat the perfect opportunity to test you. When fighting with the other goats it will pass close to you and posture to see what your reaction is. (Posturing, for those who don't know, is an aggressive stance where the goat holds its head high and tips it slightly toward you. It may have its body arched and hackles raised). Ignoring the posturing will embolden the goat and the behavior will become more and more common when you are in the pen.
- 5) The goat will begin to move closer and closer while posturing to gradually gauge your response to his challenge. That's basically what it is, a challenge to your standing in the herd.
- 6) If you continue to ignore the posturing, the next step is for the goat to start cutting you off when you walk by turning sideways in front of you and intentionally blocking your path to make you walk around it. This is considered very rude in goat terms. No dominant goat would stand for such behavior from a subordinate goat.
- 7) If you continue to ignore the goats behavior the next step is rearing up and stomping down in your direction.
- 8) This eventually leads to contact. It may be an easy push with the head or horns or it could be a "run by", where the goat hits you (seemingly by accident) while running past.
- 9) Lastly the goat takes us on directly with head butts, horning and biting.

Many people take a soft approach to these behaviors and hope the goat will grow out of it. The bad news is that it will probably get worse, not better as the goat gets older. Ignoring the behavior only emboldens

the goat to do it more often and in an escalating fashion.

The behavior is relatively easy to correct in the beginning stages but if allowed to progress it will be much tougher. In the first two steps some simple training will generally alleviate the problem. At this point the problem may not be aggression but rather a general lack of training. Either way the solution is the same. Teach the goat some basic manners. Work with tying the goat for lengthy periods of time so it learns some patience and work on lifting and holding up its feet. Use a squirt bottle or water hose to make the goat back away from the gate or feeders on your command. Use the water to make them obey. Not only are you teaching the goat some common courtesy, but by putting yourself in charge of the situation you are automatically asserting authority over the goat. This alone may prevent the goat from ever escalating its behavior.

If you are already into steps 3 through 7 then its time to step up the method to correct the behavior. Do not let any thing in the list go unchallenged by you. If the goat even postures in your direction when he is playing, deal with it right then, right there. Even if it's only a stern word and a movement in the goats direction to make it move away. Use squirt bottles, water soakers or the water hose to enforce your rules. (I like Carolyn Eddy's use of a full bucket of water over the head.)

If the goat turns and blocks your path give it a solid "head butt" to the ribs with your knee to make it move. You should never walk around the goat when it blocks your path. If you are on the trail and a goat is zigzagging in front of you to keep you from passing, rattle a stick between its hind legs or step on its heels to make it uncomfortable being in front of you. No dominant goat would ever walk around a subordinate one. The dominant goat tips its head in warning as it approaches and the subordinate goat either moves or gets a solid head butt to the ribs to make it move.

That's goat communication 101.

If your goat has progressed to steps 8 or 9 then its time to step it up. I generally recommend tipping the goat at this stage. I constantly hear from people who have tried this and say it didn't help. Tipping the goat only works if you hold it down for an extended period of time. You **MUST** break its will to dominate you. If you hold it down for a minute you may have won the day but if you hold him down for 10 minutes (sometimes much longer) you are winning the war. The goat must completely surrender to you. If you can't physically tip your goat then try a shot of pepper spray on the nose or an electric shock collar. Just make sure the correction is administered at the exact time the goat is acting aggressively. Last but not least, don't give the goat multiple warnings. Deal with it immediately the first time, every time. Warnings only teach the goat it can get away with anything for a few times before you get mad enough to deal with it.

Keep in mind that just because the goat submits to "you", it may still challenge others so be ready to help enforce your rules with visitors. Consistency is the key to a happy relationship between you and your goat.

Authors Note:

I have no doubt that someone will read this and view the suggestions as too harsh. To that person I would ask what future does an aggressive goat have? You can haul it to the sale and tell yourself its going to be adopted by a wonderful family and have a great life but the honest reality is most will become worthless scrub goats with gnarly twisted feet and a load of parasites because no one can handle them to worm or trim their feet. Most likely ending up killed by stray dogs or on someone's barbecue. Not a pretty picture. I'd much rather make things a little uncomfortable for the goat now so it can have a long, happy, productive life later.