

DOG AGGRESSION TO UNFAMILIAR PEOPLE

You are walking your dog and as a stranger walks toward you, your dog stiffens and lunges towards her. You have friends over for dinner and your dog growls and backs away when a guest reaches over to pet him. Your dog barks and runs the fence and lunges whenever your neighbor is in his backyard. In all of these situations your dog is threatening others. These are potentially dangerous situations that require immediate attention from you. Threats are signals that your dog may bite and should always be taken seriously. In the narrow sense, aggression is behavior that causes physical harm such as a bite. Here we will use aggression to refer to threats and behavior that causes harm. See the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on aggressive behavior in dogs for a more general discussion of dog aggression.

What Causes Dog Aggression To Unfamiliar People?

Dogs that are aggressive to unfamiliar people may not be aggressive to family members or to dogs that live in the same household. Many dogs are not well socialized to people, and while they can get along well with people who they are familiar with, they may be defensively aggressive toward unfamiliar individuals.

Individual and breed personalities also play a role. If your dog is of a breed that was bred for some sort of guarding or protective function, he may be more prone to aggression to unfamiliar people and animals. Aggression is also influenced by gender, hormones, experiences early in life and/or later learning.

The aggression dogs can show to unfamiliar people may be either defensive or offensive, and a dog can display each kind in different situations. The most common categories of aggression dogs show to unfamiliar people territorial, possessive, protective, or fear motivated, or even redirected aggression. The type of aggression is based on the body postures and facial expressions of the dog as well as the specific context. See the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on aggression in dogs for descriptions of different categories of aggression.

How Can Dog Aggression To Unfamiliar People Be Managed?

If your dog is threatening or aggressive to others, the first and most important thing to do is to take steps to protect people from your dog. Do not allow your dog to run loose or be off leash. Be sure your fence, doors and windows are secure so your dog cannot inadvertently escape. Do not allow your dog to greet people at the door, if this is a context in which your dog may bite.

If your dog must be in a situation where he could bite someone, he should be muzzled. It is especially important that children, older adults and people with disabilities are protected from your dog. Contact your veterinarian immediately to have your dog thoroughly evaluated for medical conditions that could be influencing his aggression.

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Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

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Always encourage your dog to treat strangers as friends unless they present some sort of threat.

Sometimes your dog's aggression can be managed by avoiding situations that cause aggression. However, this doesn't change your dog's behavior. Management procedures alone may not be practical in the long-term, depending on the specific triggers for your dog's aggression and your lifestyle. To gain some control over your dog and to teach him how to relax, work on sit/stays and down/stays. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on teaching these behaviors. Having more verbal control over your dog may make him easier to manage but won't change his aggressive behavior.

How Can Dog Aggression To Unfamiliar People Be Resolved?

Whatever behavior modification techniques are used to modify your dog's behavior must be implemented extremely carefully in order to avoid injury, maximize the chances of success and not make the problem worse. Desensitization and counter conditioning are frequently used with aggressive dogs. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents about these techniques to learn more.

Desensitization involves gradually exposing your dog to less intense versions of the stimuli that trigger an aggressive reaction, so that the behavior isn't elicited. Generally, this involves controlling the distance, movement and behavior of other people as well as the behavior of your dog. Combining desensitization with counter conditioning techniques makes the process go more quickly.

Counter conditioning involves changing your dog's emotional state so that he is less aroused, tense, or angry in the situations that currently trigger the aggression. It is difficult for your dog to be aggressive if he is relaxed and calm while playing, eating an irresistible treat or enjoying a quiet massage. These emotional states are incompatible with aggression. For example, you might sit with your dog on the side of a walking path and give your dog treats to relax and calm him as strangers pass by. Or you might ask your neighbors to toss treats over the fence when your dog is outside. When guests come over put your dog in another room until everyone is seated, then bring your dog out on leash and walk him by your guests as they toss treats on the floor.

If the planned exposures are done in a controlled, careful and gradual way, your dog can progressively learn to tolerate and enjoy the presence and approach of strangers. It is likely your dog will need to be muzzled during the early phases of the behavior modification process to ensure the safety of the people helping you.

These behavior modification techniques can be dangerous if not properly implemented. You will probably need the help of an experienced certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you work with the problem. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

How Can Dog Aggression To Unfamiliar People Be Prevented?

Because aggression problems are the result of complex interactions among many factors, it is difficult to give specific advice that will be generally effective at preventing all aggression to unfamiliar people.

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It is difficult for your dog to be aggressive if he is relaxed and calm.

However early socialization can be very important in preventing fear motivated aggression. Socialize your dog to many different kinds of people-people in uniforms, with beards, children, the elderly, etc. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on socialization to learn more about the process.

Always encourage your dog to treat strangers as friends unless the strangers present some sort of threat. Pleasant, friendly contacts with people should continue throughout your dog's life to help him to be friendly and tolerant of others.

Give treats to your dog as you approach and pass people on walks to associate good things with people. Let your dog approach others at his own pace. Teach other people how to interact with your dog-to not stare at, bend over, or reach for your dog. Dogs interpret these behaviors from people as threatening. Instead, instruct people to position themselves sideways to your dog, look to the side, at the ground or off in the distance, drop or toss treats at your dog's feet and pet your dog under the chin after your dog makes the choice to approach the stranger.

What Not To Do

Don't ignore or rationalize your dog's threatening behavior toward other people. Without professional help, your dog's behavior is likely to worsen.

It is not your dog's job to protect you, your property or personal belongings. Do not allow or encourage your dog to be grumpy with strangers. Discourage territorial barking or "on patrol" behavior. Seek professional help immediately if your dog becomes protective, territorial or threatening to others.

Physical punishment for aggression will usually make the problem worse as it escalates an already tense and reactive situation. Aggression to strangers is not caused by a your lack of "dominance" or "leadership" over your dog so "alpha rolls," scruff shakes or other dominance exercises won't help your dog like people. As mentioned, having better verbal control over your dog by brushing up on your training will help you manage your dog more effectively, but it won't solve an aggression problem.

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