

Social Situation



“I have a 7 year-old chocolate Lab that I have never been able to take on walks without having him try to attack another dog,” says Nina from Tacoma.

“We have a 6 year-old shepherd mix that will not allow anyone into our house. He barks, growls, lunges and will try to attack people at the front door or by the gate of our front yard. We can’t trust him and we can’t have people come to the house. We miss our friends—it’s a miserable existence.” This from Jason and Jennifer in Gig Harbor. The cause of both of these problems is simple—lack of proper and adequate socializing.

We’ve raised the bar very high for behavior in pet dogs, especially for those in urban settings. People do not want to walk down the street with their friendly dog and see “Cujo” coming toward them, or visit your home and be greeted by him at the front door. We’ve all had enough of antisocial dogs, especially since you can train them to be friendly. Here’s how!

Be a Pro-Active Dog Owner

Many owners simply avoid potentially scary circumstances and their dog never learns to deal with the things that cause fear. You must expose puppies and adult dogs (if you get an older rescue dog) to the things they see as scary or upsetting in the correct way. Otherwise, fear can easily turn to aggression.

We don’t know exactly why, but some dogs react badly to specific people, like those in uniform, or to skateboards, trucks, fire engines, lawn mowers, vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, and even certain other breeds, sizes or temperaments of dogs. These types of things can cause unexpected and unwanted behaviors in dogs. It’s unclear why some dogs react to certain things and others do not, but one theory is that the canine brain works differently than the human brain.

Social Experiences

It has been proven through scientific research that dogs are unable to “generalize” learning. What this means is that each time your dog sees something new, it’s like starting all over again. Each new dog brings a different and, sometimes, challenging set of behaviors. Raise the intensity just a little, like with multiple dogs at the dog park, and your dog may become overwhelmed, over-stimulated, or fearful, and may react badly.

It’s not enough to meet or play with one or two other puppies or with just the adult dog that is already a member of the household. Small breed dogs should play with different types of puppies, large and small. Conversely, large breed dogs must learn to play with small ones. Supervised play with a diverse group of playmates in a puppy class is critical in helping a puppy to understand a variety of cues. A large breed puppy will learn from a small dog when to back off during a play session.

In my current Puppy Kindergarten, the owner of a small breed dog was so anxious she wanted to pick up her puppy every time another dog came close. Try to let your dog meet and get to know other dogs even if it might be a little scary for you. By picking up the small puppy each time another puppy comes around, you simply reinforce his fear.

Teach Your Dog to “Play Nice”

Owners must participate in dog play sessions, especially when new dogs are present. Feedback from owners during play sessions is also essential. Always have at least two adults present to give both positive and corrective feedback. A constant banter of happy talk to help relax the dog is preferable when meeting someone new. Be nearby and able to step in and separate dogs if things get too heated. When that happens stop play with a firm “Too bad!” and silently hold on to those specific dogs for about a minute. Then release them back with a happy “Go play!” If things get heated again, repeat the process until they start to understand what is proper play between dogs.

Introduce toys into play sessions to help the dogs learn to share their play-things. A fun game of “keep away” between dogs with a toy is fine, but not if the dog becomes overly possessive and starts baring her teeth or displaying other antisocial behaviors. In this case, take the toy away.

Get Out and About in Public with Your Dog

Dog owners want a dog that will behave predictably—one they will feel safe bringing out in public. To accomplish this you must constantly challenge your dog with new experiences. Take your dog out on walks in busy retail areas where there are all types of people—such as people in hats, sunglasses,

work shoes or carrying luggage. Make sure you walk them around baby carriages, wheel chairs, skateboards, motorcycles and things that may set off a reaction.

You must also have people come to your home starting as soon as possible after you adopt the dog. This trains the dog to accept friendly strangers into the home and to not become overly protective or territorial. There are some dogs that are naturally hard-wired to guard, like the unfortunate example sited in the beginning. In that situation we had to keep introducing new people under very controlled conditions until the dog's behavior became more and more reliable. If this type of socializing had been done early enough the dog would have learned to react quite differently.

How To Reverse the Trend

It's important to keep a log of your dog's social experiences. Keep track of those things that seem to trigger negative reactions. On your next walk be watchful for these triggers and pull the dog's attention away from these things by using a high pitched happy sounding voice and quickly pop a high-value treat in his mouth.

Hopefully, if done correctly you will help make your dog non-reactive to something that previously caused fear. In time, and, with a good number of repetitions, this exercise may stop the negative behavior altogether.

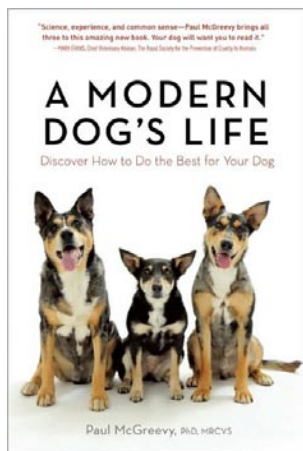
"We have a 6 year-old shepherd mix that will not allow anyone into our house."

Happy Dogs Make for Happy Dog Owners

If you start exposing your dog early to the things that trigger unwanted behaviors you may help him become more comfortable as well as more predictable in a variety of situations. If you feel unable to do it yourself, seek out a competent and experienced dog training professional with a background in handling aggression. In some places there are also "Growly Classes" offered that address these behaviors in a controlled and supervised setting.

Statistics tell us that most dogs that die young do not lose their lives due to illness or tragic accidents – it's due to behavioral problems that stem from lack of socializing that results in someone being bitten. These are dogs that are labeled "bad dogs" and end up being euthanized. By committing yourself and your dog to extensive and ongoing socializing you may actually save your dog's life by preventing him from becoming aggressive. In doing so, you are taking positive and proactive steps to make sure the life you share with your dog is both a safe and enjoyable one for everyone involved. 🐾

Deborah Rosen is the owner of Good Citizen Dog Training, based in Tacoma, Wash. She is a certified dog trainer and behavior consultant and specializes in puppy training as well as dog-to-dog aggression. She teaches a popular and well-attended class in Pierce County called "Growly Class" that addresses these issues. For more information on this class visit goodcitizendog.com.



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