

## **Behavior FAQ: Threatening and Aggressive Behavior Toward Family Members**

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Before assuming your dog's aggressive or threatening action is behavior related, have a veterinarian examine your dog. Anything that is making your dog uncomfortable or irritable, such as an abscessed tooth or ear infection, can lower his threshold for threats and aggression. So can certain medications and other medical problems.

One common reason dogs are threatening and aggressive to people in the family, especially children, is because they are afraid. Dogs that were fine with babies often develop problems when the child begins to crawl and invade their personal space. You may notice your dog trying to avoid your child when possible. Problems arise when your dog can't remove itself from a situation, for whatever reason, and threatens or bites your child so your child will leave her alone.

Dogs can also be afraid of adults in the family, often when they know they are going to be "disciplined." Many bites have happened when owners grab for their dog's collar, confront the dog after he's taken something from the trash or try to drag the dog over to show him a "mess" made earlier.

Do not believe the popular media and television trainers that your dog's behavior is all about "dominance." Some dogs will challenge their owners for possession of space, toys or food, and these dogs may be displaying elements of dominance aggression. However, many of these problems are identified as dominance related when they are actually the result of fear.

Most dogs (there are notable exceptions) don't want to injure people and simply want to warn them to go away or stop what they are doing. Aggression—biting and other behaviors that harm—is different from threatening behaviors—growling, lunging, snapping without injury, etc. Some dogs who snap, growl and show other threatening behaviors never bite. Others do. You should assume your dog will bite and seek help before this happens.

Your immediate goal is to keep people in your family, especially children, safe from your dog. Until you get help, avoid situations in which your dog is likely to bite. Don't rationalize this problem as your dog was having a bad day or perhaps was startled.

If your dog is displaying aggression toward your child, take an objective look at the relationship your child has with your dog. Dogs are not designed to be children's personal play toys and tolerate anything the child wants to do to them. Riding the dog like a horse or trying to hug or kiss the dog when the dog clearly isn't comfortable will likely result in a bite. Your dog needs a safe place to get away from your children when she wants to.

Your dog is more dangerous if he is inconsistent in his behavior. For example, sometimes he may allow family members to take toys away and sometimes he won't. Just because he is tolerant once, do *not* allow this to lull you into a false sense of security that he's "over" his

problem. He is not. If he's growled or snapped even once, unless you take steps to change his behavior, he will do it again.

We do not recommend confrontational techniques, such as leash and collar corrections, alpha rolls and scruff shakes. Your dog will not learn to be tolerant of family members using these procedures, and they put you at great risk of being bitten.

Threats and aggression are serious problems. Private obedience lessons will not help this problem. Your dog may sit, lie down and come when called quite readily and still growl at people or try to bite them.

### **FIND A BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT TO HELP**

Many problems are easily corrected through modification training, particularly if problems are addressed early. Find an animal behavior consultant in your area through one of the following Web sites: [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#), [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#) or [Animal Behavior Society](#). Learn more by reading "Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant."