

Behavior FAQ: Threatening and Aggressive Behavior Toward People Outside the Family
By Suzanne Hetts, PhD, CAAB, and Daniel Estep, PhD, CAAB, of Animal Behavior Associates, Inc., reprinted with permission from HelpingFido.com

Before assuming your dog's aggressive or threatening action is behavior related, have a veterinarian examine your dog. Anything that makes 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.

The most common reason dogs are threatening and aggressive to people they don't know is because they are afraid. This is particularly true of children your dog doesn't know well. Often, dogs are afraid or anxious when children reach out to pet them, and they snap or growl to make the child go away.

Some dogs may appear quite threatening at the door or from behind a fence but are quite friendly once visitors actually enter your home. This is likely a manifestation of territorial threatening behavior.

Do not believe the popular media and television trainers that your dog's behavior is all about "dominance." It's nothing of the sort, and if you try to change your dog's behavior based on that starting point, you will not succeed and will likely end up worsening the problem.

Most dogs (there are notable exceptions) don't want to injure people but 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, and seek help before this happens.

Your immediate goal is to keep people, 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 she was startled, or the person looked or smelled odd.

Your dog is more dangerous if he is inconsistent in his behavior. For example, sometimes he may allow people to pet him 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 friendly to people with 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.”