



**A non-profit that educates  
and supports dog owners**

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Avoid all situations that  
may trigger threats or  
an attack.

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## DOG AGGRESSION TO FAMILY MEMBERS

You reach down to pick up a bone your dog is chewing on or to take a toy away and your dog stiffens and growls. You walk by your dog as he eats and he lunges at you. Your dog is sitting on the sofa and as you try to sit next to him, he snarls and barks and won't move over. Whenever you try to put the leash on your dog, he shows his teeth. When you try to hug your dog or look him in the eyes, he growls and snaps. Growling, snarling, showing teeth, lunging and staring are all threatening behaviors. Threats are signals that your dog may bite and should always be taken seriously.

### What Causes Dogs to Be Aggressive To Family Members?

The reasons why some dogs develop aggression problems and others don't are not well understood. Genetic factors, hormones, early experiences and learning can all have an influence. Clearly there are both individual and breed differences in the ease with which aggression can be elicited. The aggression dogs can show to family members may be either defensive or offensive, and a dog can display each kind in different situations. Dogs most often show dominance, possessive, protective, redirected, or play motivated aggression to family members. The type of aggression is based on the body postures and facial expressions of the dog as well as the specific context. The dog may be aggressive only to selected members of the family, or to all of them. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on aggression in dogs to learn more about these different types of behavior.

### How Can Aggression To Family Members Be Managed?

If your dog is threatening or aggressive to you or those who live with you, the first and most important thing to do is to take steps to protect everyone. You must manage the environment to minimize your dog's opportunity to engage in aggressive behaviors. Avoid all situations that may trigger threats or an attack.

If you cannot avoid aggressive situations or if you don't know what triggers attacks, your dog should be muzzled whenever he is around family members. This kind of unpredictable aggression is quite dangerous. Contact your veterinarian immediately to have your dog thoroughly evaluated for medical conditions that could be influencing his aggression. It is very important that children, older adults and those with disabilities be kept safe from an aggressive dog. You may need to keep your dog isolated from certain family members. This is usually not a practical arrangement long-term, so if your dog's behavior does not improve you may need to talk with your veterinarian about euthanasia. In most cases it is neither practical nor safe to find another home for a dog with an aggressive history.

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.

*Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.*

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Have your dog  
evaluated by your  
veterinarian for  
medical problems.

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### **How Can Aggressive Behavior To Family Members Be Changed?**

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, such that the behavior isn't elicited. Generally, this involves controlling the distance, movement and behavior of the family member 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 two emotional states are incompatible with aggression.

For example, if your dog guards his food bowl you might start tossing some treats as you walk by at a safe distance. If your dog protects his toys, start trading his least favorite toy for a tasty treat.

These 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 Aggression To Family Members Be Prevented?**

Because the reasons why some dogs develop aggression problems and others don't are not well understood, it is difficult to give specific advice that will be generally effective at preventing these problems.

Neutering male dogs reduces the likelihood of certain forms of aggression. Choosing a breed that wasn't bred to perform any sort of aggressive function such as guarding or fighting should reduce your chances of having a dog with an aggression problem. This doesn't mean any given breed is either inherently aggressive or non-aggressive.

Early socialization may reduce aggression. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on this topic to learn more. Obedience training your dog using reward-based methods has many beneficial effects, but it's not clear whether such training actually prevents aggression problems.

In general you should teach your dog that giving up control to you results in "good things" happening to him. For example, practice picking up your dog's food bowl, putting a special treat in it and giving it back to him. Toss treats on the floor to entice your dog to move off the furniture. Accustom your dog to being restrained and handled from an early age by giving him irresistible treats as you gently hold him, roll him over on his back, massage his paws, ears, tail and neck.

*Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.*

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Never ignore or  
rationalize aggressive  
behavior.

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### What Not To Do

If your dog is already displaying aggression to you, implementing any of the sample techniques in this article could be dangerous. Talk first with your veterinarian who can evaluate possible medical causes. Next seek help from a professional behaviorist.

Ignoring or rationalizing threatening or aggressive behavior from your dog is also dangerous. It is not acceptable for dogs to threaten or hurt family members. However, if you use physical punishment with your dog, or attempt to use “alpha rolls” and scruff shakes, your dog may respond with defensive aggression to defend himself. That’s why those procedures often either create aggression problems or make them worse and should be avoided.

If your dog is showing aggression, do not engage in a battle of wills or a confrontation with him and force him to do what you want. He is likely to escalate his behavior and you could be injured.

Never encourage your dog to be threatening, possessive, territorial or protective of family or property. Never leave dogs and children unsupervised.

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