

Published based on [Recognizing, Preventing, and Handling Dog Aggression](#)

# **Recognizing, Preventing, and Handling Dog Aggression**

**A dog is an instinctively aggressive creature.** In the wild, aggression came in very handy: **dogs needed aggression to hunt, to defend themselves from other creatures, and to defend resources such as food, a place to sleep, and a mate.**

**Selective breeding over the centuries has minimized and refined this trait** significantly, but there's just no getting around it: **dogs are physically capable of inflicting serious harm** (just look at those teeth!) because that's how they've survived and evolved. And Mother Nature is pretty wily – it's **hard to counteract the power of instinct!** But that doesn't mean that we, as dog lovers and owners, are entirely helpless when it comes to **handling our dogs.**

There's a lot that we can do to **prevent aggression** from rearing its ugly head in the first place – and even if prevention hasn't been possible (for whatever reason), there are still steps that we can take to recognize and deal with it efficiently. - **Different aggression types** - There are several **different types of canine aggression.** The two most common ones are: - **Aggression towards strangers** - **Aggression towards family members.**

You may be wondering why we're bothering categorizing this stuff: after all, **aggression is aggression**, and we want to turf it out NOW, not waste time with the details – right? Well ... not quite. These **two different types of aggression stem from very different causes, and require different types of treatment.**

**Aggression towards strangers** - What is it? It's pretty easy to tell when a dog's nery around strange people. He's jumpy and on the alert: either he can't sit still and is **constantly fidgeting, leaping at the smallest sound, and pacing around barking and whining; or he's veerrry still indeed, sitting rock-steady in one place, staring hard at the object of his suspicions** (a visitor, the mailman, someone approaching him on the street while he's tied up outside a store.) Why does it happen?

There's **one major reason why a dog doesn't like strange people:** he's never had the chance to get used to them. Remember, **your dog relies 100% on you to broaden his horizons for him:** without being taken on lots of outings to see the world and realize for himself, through consistent and positive experiences, that the unknown doesn't necessarily equal bad news for him, how can he realistically be expected to relax in an unfamiliar situation? What can I do about it?

The **process of accustoming your dog** to the world and all the strange people (and animals) that it contains is called socialization. This is an incredibly important aspect of your dog's upbringing: in fact, it's pretty hard to overemphasize just how important it is. **Socializing your dog means exposing him from a young age** (generally speaking, as soon as he's had his vaccinations) to a wide variety of new experiences, new people, and new animals.

**How does socialization prevent stranger aggression?** When you socialize your dog, you're getting him to learn through experience that new sights and sounds are fun, not scary. **It's not enough to expose an adult dog to a crowd of unfamiliar people** and tell him to "Settle down, Roxy, it's OK" – he has to learn that it's OK for himself. And he needs to do it from puppyhood for the lesson to sink in. The more types of people and animals he meets (babies, toddlers, teenagers, old people, men, women, people wearing uniforms, people wearing motorcycle helmets, people carrying umbrellas, etc) in a **fun and relaxed context, the more at ease and happy – and safe around strangers** - he'll be in general.

**How can I socialize my dog so that he doesn't develop a fear of strangers?** Socializing your dog is pretty easy to do – it's more of a general effort than a specific training regimen. First of all, you should take him to puppy preschool. This is a generic term for a **series of easy group-training classes for puppies** (often performed at the vet clinic, which has the additional **benefit of teaching your dog positive associations** with the vet!).

In a puppy preschool class, about ten or so puppy owners get together with a qualified trainer (often there'll be at least two trainers present – the more there are, the better, since it means you get more one-on-one time with a professional) and start teaching their puppies the basic obedience commands: sit, stay, and so on. Even though

the obedience work is very helpful and is a great way to start your puppy on the road to being a trustworthy adult dog, really the best part of puppy preschool is the play sessions: several times throughout the class, the puppies are encouraged to run around off-leash and play amongst themselves.

This is an ideal environment for them to learn good social skills: there's a whole bunch of unfamiliar dogs present (which teaches them how to interact with strange dogs), there's a whole bunch of unfamiliar people present (which teaches them that new faces are nothing to be afraid of), and the environment is safe and controlled (there's at least one certified trainer present to make sure that things don't get out of hand). **Socialization doesn't just stop with puppy preschool**, though. It's an ongoing effort throughout the life of your puppy and dog: he needs to be taken to a whole bunch of new places and environments. Remember not to overwhelm him: start off slow, and build up his tolerance gradually.

**Aggression towards family members** - There are **two common reasons why a dog is aggressive towards members of his own human family**: - He's trying to **defend something he thinks of as his** from a perceived threat (you). This is known as resource guarding, and though it may sound innocuous, there's actually a lot more going on here than your dog simply trying to keep his kibble to himself. - **He's not comfortable with the treatment/handling he's getting from you** or other members of the family.

**What's resource guarding?** Resource guarding is pretty common among dogs. The term refers to **overly-possessive behavior on behalf of your dog**: for instance, snarling at you if you approach him when he's eating, or giving you "the eye" (a flinty-eyed, direct stare) if you reach your hand out to take a toy away from him. **All dogs can be possessive from time to time** – it's in their natures. Sometimes they're possessive over things with no conceivable value: inedible trash, balled up pieces of paper or tissue, old socks.

More frequently, however, **resource-guarding becomes an issue over items** with a very real and understandable value: food and toys. Why does it happen? It all boils down to the **issue of dominance**. Let me take a moment to explain this concept: **dogs are pack animals**. This means that they're used to a very structured environment: **in a dog-pack, each individual animal is ranked in a hierarchy of position and power** (or "dominance") in relation to every other animal. Each animal is aware of the rank of every other animal, which means he knows specifically how to act in any given situation (whether to back down, whether to push the issue, whether to muscle in or not on somebody else's turf, etc etc). To your dog, **the family environment is no different to the dog-pack environment**.

**Your dog has ranked each member of the family**, and has his own perception of where he ranks in that environment as well. This is where it gets interesting: **if your dog perceives himself as higher up on the social totem-pole than other family members, he's going to get cheeky**. If he's really got an overinflated sense of his own importance, he'll start to act aggressively. Why? **Because dominance and aggression are the exclusive rights of a superior-ranked animal**. No underdog would ever show **aggression or act dominantly to a higher-ranked animal** (the consequences would be dire, and he knows it!)

**Resource guarding is a classic example of dominant behavior**: only a higher-ranked dog (a "dominant" dog) would act aggressively in defence of resources. To put it plainly: if it was clear to your dog that he is not, in fact, the **leader of the family**, he'd never even dream of trying to prevent you from taking his food or toys – because a lower-ranking dog (him) will **always go along with what the higher-ranking dogs (you and your family) say**. So what can I do about it? The **best treatment for dominant, aggressive behavior is consistent, frequent obedience work**, which will underline your authority over your dog.

**Just two fifteen-minute sessions a day will make it perfectly clear to your dog that you're the boss**, and that it pays to do what you say. You can make this fact clear to him by **rewarding him** (with treats and lavish praise) for **obeying a command**, and **isolating him** (putting him in "time-out", either outside the house or in a room by himself) for misbehaviour.

If you're not entirely confident doing this yourself, you may wish to consider enlisting the assistance of a qualified dog-trainer.

**Brush up on your understanding of canine psychology and communication**, so that you understand what he's trying to say

This will help you to nip any dominant behaviors in the bud, and to **communicate your own authority more effectively**

Train regularly: **keep obedience sessions short and productive** (no more than fifteen minutes – maybe two or three of these per day).

Why doesn't my dog like to be handled? **All dogs have different handling thresholds.** Some dogs like lots of cuddles, and are perfectly content to be hugged, kissed, and have arms slung over their shoulders (**this is the ultimate "I'm the boss" gesture to a dog, which is why a lot of them won't tolerate it.**)

Others – usually the ones not accustomed to a great deal of physical contact from a very young age – aren't comfortable with too much full-body contact and will get nerved and agitated if someone persists in trying to hug them.

Another **common cause of handling-induced aggression is a bad grooming experience: nail-clipping and bathing are the two common culprits.** When you clip a dog's nails, it's very easy to "quick" him – that is, cut the blood vessel that runs inside the nail. This is **extremely painful to a dog, and is a sure-fire way to cause a long-lasting aversion to those clippers.**

**Being washed is something that a great many dogs have difficulty dealing with** – a lot of owners, when confronted with a wild-eyed, half-washed, upset dog, feel that in order to complete the wash they have to forcibly restrain him.

This only **adds to the dog's sense of panic, and reinforces his impression of a wash as something to be avoided at all costs** – if necessary, to defend himself from it with a display of teeth and hackles. **Can I "retrain" him to enjoy being handled and groomed?** In a word: yes. It's a lot easier if you start from a young age – handle your puppy a lot, get him used to being touched and rubbed all over.

**Young dogs generally enjoy being handled** – it's only older ones who haven't had a lot of physical contact throughout their lives that sometimes find physical affection difficult to accept. Practice picking up his paws and touching them with the clipper; practice taking him into the bath (or outside, under the faucet – whatever works for you, but warm water is much more pleasant for a dog than a freezing spray of ice-water!), and augment the process throughout with lots of praise and the occasional small treat.

For an **older dog that may already have had several unpleasant handling/grooming experiences**, things are a little more difficult. You need to **undo the damage already caused by those bad experiences**, which you can do by taking things very slowly – with an emphasis on keeping your dog calm. The instant he starts to show signs of stress, stop immediately and let him relax. Try to make the whole thing into a game: give him lots of praise, pats, and treats. Take things slowly. Don't push it too far: if you get nervous, stop.

**Dogs show aggression for a reason:** they're warning you to back off, or else! If your dog just can't seem to accept being groomed, no matter how much practice you put in, it's best to hand the job over to the professionals. **Your vet will clip his nails for you** (make sure you tell him first that he gets aggressive when the clippers come out, so your vet can take the necessary precautions!).

As far as washing and brushing goes, **the dog-grooming business is a flourishing industry:** for a small fee, you can get your dog washed, clipped, brushed, and whatever else you require by experienced professionals (again, make sure you tell them about your dog's reaction to the experience first!)

For more **information on handling aggressive and dominant behaviors**, as well as a great deal of detailed information on a host of other **common dog behavior problems**, check out SitStayFetch.

It's a **complete owner's guide to owning, rearing, and training your dog, and it deals with all aspects of dog ownership.** To get the inside word on **preventing and dealing with problem behaviors like aggression and dominance in your dog**, SitStayFetch is well worth a look.

You can visit the SitStayFetch site by clicking on the link below:

[Sit.stay.fetch](http://Sit.stay.fetch)

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