



Aggression or Fear?

Is your dog really aggressive or is she just terrified? How can you tell? 99% of the calls professional dog trainers receive about “aggressive” dogs ultimately turn out to be solely related to fear. The technical term is “fear aggression,” but I prefer “fear reactivity.” When the word “aggression” is used, most people automatically assume that the dog means to cause harm, is unpredictable, and is ready to attack. When a dog is fearful, she means no harm, she just wants the scary thing(s) to go away. Unfortunately, many owners don’t recognize their dogs are afraid and they end up punishing the dog for what they believe to be “bad” behavior.

Don’t fall into the “Lassie Syndrome” and assume that all dogs are the same. It is pretty silly that so many people expect their dog to understand the English language, to love to be touched and hugged, to love every person and dog they meet, and to not be afraid of anything we perceive to be non-threatening. We must remember that the important thing is what the DOG perceives as scary, not our perception of what they should be scared of.

Here’s the thing: If I am afraid of big, hairy spiders, I don’t care how friendly the spider is or how much you try to convince me that this particular spider “loves people.” I still don’t want that scary monster coming at me! And please God, don’t let it reach out to try to touch me! If I try to get away, but you insist on forcing the spider on me, I will probably scream, maybe cry, perhaps lash out at the spider or possibly even you (which at this point, you probably deserve). Would you then get angry and frustrated with me? Yell at me, hit me, yank on my collar, alpha roll me? I should hope not! The bottom line is, **we cannot punish fear out of a dog.**

It doesn't make any sense. We would never do that to a friend or child. Why is it okay to do it to our dogs?

When a dog is trying to communicate that they are afraid, their body language is almost always crystal clear. If your dog is afraid, you will undoubtedly notice things like ears pulled back flat against her head, severely tucked tail, cowering, moving in slow motion, half-moon eyes, mouth closed, lip licking, panting, pacing, and even urinating. Our poor dogs try so hard to show us with their body (since they can't speak English) and when that doesn't work, they will try to communicate their fear in the only other possible ways they can: growl, "spooky" bark, bare teeth, air snap, or bite. Amazingly, still these signs are often misunderstood and either ignored or punished, and people continue to try to force the dog to "be a good dog" and accept the scary monster.

Understandably, it is can be disturbing and embarrassing when your dog exhibits any of these behaviors to friendly strangers, kids (toddlers are especially terrifying!), other dogs, etc. However, if you have a fearful dog, it is up to you to learn how she communicates and help her feel more confident in the world. Imagine how awful it must be to live with such fear.

The best way to help our fearful dogs is by utilizing desensitization and counter conditioning methods. This is behavior modification work, so obviously it takes time and patience. There is no quick fix. It is highly recommended that you seek help from a certified, professional dog trainer (APDT.com).

Here are some general rules and suggestions when working with a fearful dog:

1. NEVER punish a dog for growling. What?! Read it again: NEVER punish a dog for growling! When a dog growls we should praise her heartily and say, "Thank you!" "Thank you so much for warning me and telling me that this situation is making you very uncomfortable and frightened." If we punish a dog for growling, she will eventually stop warning and if she is threatened or frightened enough, she will go straight for the bite.
2. When encountering scary monsters, don't force it, but don't ignore it. Learn proper desensitization and counter conditioning methods.
3. Fear is contagious. When a scary monster appears, you must put on your best happy, silly, jolly routine. If you don't feel like a fool, you're not doing it right.

4. Don't allow anyone to force themselves on your dog (i.e., "This is a super friendly hairy spider and he loves people!"). Always let your dog make the decision to interact at her own pace. This will require a lot of communication on your part, as people are harder to train than dogs.

5. Teaching a dog rock solid basic obedience skills always helps behavior modification work.

6. Decipher which treat your dog considers to be the best, most delicious, super high value, gold star treat in the wide world, and then make it available only when scary monsters appear.

7. If you have a new puppy, socialize, socialize, socialize! With proper puppy training, we can nip fear issues right in the bud before they ever even begin.