

# Managing a Dog with Behavior Challenges

By Sherry Woodard

I have met many dogs with behavior challenges whose people want to keep them and help them, but they just don't know how. This resource can help people learn how to manage dogs with behavior challenges like aggression.

“Managing” means doing what is required to keep your dog from getting into trouble, while offering him great quality of life. It involves getting to know your dog, helping him to become as social as possible, supervising your dog when necessary – with the ultimate goal of keeping him safe for life.



You probably know that it's not OK to allow your dog to injure a person or another animal. But, it's also unacceptable to let your dog practice inappropriate or threatening behavior (such as lunging or nipping), even if that behavior hasn't led to injury. Don't wait for your dog to bite someone before getting help.

If you allow your dog to continue threatening behavior, you are putting yourself, the dog and others in danger. Without help, the dog can make bad decisions that may result in physical damage to a person or another animal, and could ultimately cost the dog her life. Don't take that chance – learn how to manage your dog so everyone stays safe.

There are various tools and techniques that can help dogs who are currently exhibiting dangerous behavior. I recommend reading this resource (and the others mentioned below) and working with a kind, gentle trainer, a veterinarian, and your family and friends to help your dog become less fearful and more comfortable in the world.

Fear and a lack of positive experiences are the main reasons for aggression in dogs. (For more information, see the resource called “Dogs and Aggression.”) You should be aware, though, that aggression can be genetic: Not every dog is born genetically stable. Your vet can help you determine if there's a genetic component to your dog's aggressiveness.

## Get to Know Your Dog

Just like people, dogs communicate using “body language,” so your dog is communicating with his entire body, not just his tail or his voice. To know how your dog is feeling, you'll need to learn to read your particular dog's body language. For more specifics, see the resource called “Dog Body Language.”

Many people chastise a dog for growling, thinking that the dog is being “bad.” But growling is actually a good way for your dog to communicate. Growling is his way of saying he is feeling threatened by something or someone. If you punish your dog for growling, you will have less warning before a possible bite.

## Socialize Your Dog

Many dogs with behavior challenges can learn to feel better about other animals, including people. If your dog is aggressive and fearful because she hasn't had a lot of positive experiences, there is a good chance that you can have a more comfortable, less aggressive dog if you work with her gently and consistently.

Before starting any training with your dog, please bring the dog to your vet for a medical exam. You'll want to rule out medical causes for the dog's aggressive behavior.

Start the training by teaching basic commands using positive-reinforcement training methods. Be a kind, gentle, patient leader. Don't expect your dog to know what you want; you'll need to teach him to focus and learn from you. So, work with the dog in your home, away from distractions. Teaching him in your home is going to help him know what you are asking for when you need him to focus on you in all other situations.

In every interaction with your dog, think in terms of building a positive relationship: He must be able to trust you. Give plenty of rewards, but have the dog earn them. Ask the dog to give you a sit or a "down" before you give a treat. He should learn to wait for everything he wants. Remember, too, that even though training is a serious thing, learning should be fun for your dog!

There are many helpful training resources in You & Your Pets, on the Best Friends website at [www.bestfriends.org/theanimals/petcare/dogs.cfm](http://www.bestfriends.org/theanimals/petcare/dogs.cfm). Here are a few to guide you:

- Why I Use Relationship-Based Training
- Positive Reinforcement: Training with Praise and Rewards
- Teaching Your Dog Basic Commands
- Clicker Training for You and Your Pets
- Improving a Dog's Social Skills
- The Look of Fear in Dogs
- How to Educate Your Dog
- Teaching Your Dog the Joys of Touch
- Meeting Dogs Safely
- Barrier Aggression
- Object Guarding and Food Aggression in Dogs
- Recommended Dog Training and Care Resources

If it's warranted, train your dog using a muzzle. Again, focus on the positive: Teach your dog to look forward to wearing her muzzle. For more details on the use of muzzles for training, read "Muzzles: A Tool to Keep Everyone Safe." This resource will help you to work safely with your dog to change how she feels about new people and other animals.

If at any point during training you feel that your dog may injure you, stop! Think about what you were doing. Keep in mind that progress takes time; if you were pushing too far or too fast, slow down. Back up a step or two – to a place where the dog was having

fun. Check your tone and emotion. Did you become frustrated or angry? Could the dog have felt threatened? Most genetically stable dogs will respond to kind, gentle training by making steady progress. If you do reach a plateau and your dog stops making progress, make an appointment with your veterinarian for another medical checkup. Any kind of pain, infection or injury may have a negative effect on a dog's behavior.

Finally, learning and using socialization skills is a lifelong process for the dog. Keep practicing and rewarding her for the rest of her life. Your goal is a relaxed dog who is comfortable in the world and can enjoy a wide variety of experiences – doing more while staying safe.

*Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.*

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**Disclaimer:** Best Friends Animal Society is not responsible for any injuries to anyone using the techniques described in this article. Any person using the techniques described here does so at his/her own risk.