**Preventing dog aggression and protecting dog owners**



Melissa Berryman Dog Trainer and Author

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Dogs continue to wag their way deeper into the heart of our lives. They add to our joy, help improve our health and add much to our well being. Yet with all that is good, there is a less talked about downside to dog ownership that often leads to avoidable heartbreak. A heartbreak that is set into motion by entrenched societal messages that actually set the stage for injuries. Currently there is an expectation that good dogs love everyone and other animals, allow anyone to do anything to them and at a moment’s notice will be our own personal superheroes. Only bad dogs owned by bad people bite or cause problems. Animal officers who respond to the myriad problems encountered by dog owners and communities know that that just isn’t true. However the same misconceptions are continually legitimized, leading to same incidents occurring with no end in sight. Dog owners continue to be caught unawares by an unforgiving society that often holds them strictly liable regardless of why an incident occurred.

As a dog owner, you can take action by becoming more pro-active in keeping your dog safe. Seeing how your dog will react or letting your dog be in charge gives him permission to make dog decisions in a human world. By placing human behavior into the mix, why an event occurs can be better understood and then future incidents prevented. To not do so gives strangers control over your liability. When something happens and a dog owner is sued the dog is used as a scapegoat and eliminated. Disconnecting our actions from the events by not looking at situation and context of all involved leads to the repetition of the same human behavior that causes the problems with dogs. By understanding the differences between how humans view the world from how dogs do, taking control of situations and putting safety first, dog owners can protect themselves and their beloved pet from disaster.

**Do**



* [protect yourself and your dog](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#do0)
* [be in control of encounters](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#do1)
* [insist that others ask the dog before petting him/her](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#do2)
* [understand that rank within a dog’s group dictates how they act](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#do3)
* [become familiar with fight or flight behavior](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#do4)

**Don't**



* [give strangers control over your liability](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#dont0)
* [allow anyone to hug your dog](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#dont1)
* [expect your dog to be you](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#dont2)
* [allow anyone to handle your dog](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#dont3)
* [skimp on learning how to control your dog](http://expertbeacon.com/print/500#dont4)

**Do**

**Do protect yourself and your dog**

By promoting that only “bad dogs” bite, people have come to expect dogs to tolerate anything they do regardless of situation or context. Another fallacy is the belief that behavior can be bought or trained. Dogs routinely are expected to act in uniform fashion and not as the individuals they are. This leads people to be careless and ignorant of the rules dogs live by. Dogs are wired to be predatory canines that act and react due to the actions of others and their owners. If you are ignorant of how dogs experience the world and how people are prone to act towards them, you can be setting an incident into motion. When an incident involving a dog does occur owners are often sued and dogs are put down needlessly. This leads to the repetition of preventable injuries and the stereotyping of certain breeds. Like car crashes however, everyone involved plays a role in an event. And like in safe driving, it is up to you, the dog owner, to navigate your dog safely through your everyday life.

**Do be in control of encounters**

When it comes to meeting strangers, your dog needs to know whether a strange person or animal is a friend, its foe or its prey. They figure that out by the way something acts as well as take cues from you. There are no friendly and unfriendly dogs as your dog’s response is linked to the stranger’s behavior. Instead, you can help your dog know that someone is a friend by setting the tone of every encounter both verbally and through your body language. By acting friendly and relaxed you convey to your dog and others that there is no danger to be on the defensive about. Use a higher pitched voice to convey that the encounter is a positive one and continue talking positively throughout the meeting. Ensure you are in control of your dog’s leash but not holding it tightly to prevent the tension of fight or flight (see Do #5) Silence, tense bodies and tight leashes convey to dogs that they should be on the defensive towards new people and animals.

**Do insist that others ask the dog before petting him/her**

Dogs are one of the few animals people have no qualms “molesting” without asking first. In the past people have been trained to offer a hand or fist for a dog to sniff. Dogs never sniff another dog’s paws when they meet them nor does the hand give any useful information about you. The stiff held arm out does tell a new dog that you aren’t sure and that you may take action against them. Like you, many dogs prefer to be asked before they are touched. Having someone ask you beforehand is the first step however your dog has not said yes yet. Its easy to ASK the Dog if it wishes to be patted. By simply teaching people to tap the outside of their leg like a wagging tail strangers can see if your dog wants to engage positively with them or not. Tell people to tap their leg and see. If your dog wishes to be patted it will come over relax and look for the attention. If it doesn’t it will stay away or it may need more time to sniff and get to know someone.

**Do understand that rank within a dog’s group dictates how they act**

It's fun to think that Goldens and Labs are good “family dogs” that act in prescribed manners. For that to be true, all human siblings would be the same too because they are born to the same parents. A dog’s temperament is formed by what it has to do for the group, as well as by the make-up of that group. Like us, dogs form hierarchies in their groups. If a dog’s job is to lead like the general in the army, then you can expect it to be a confident and in charge dog. Those dogs who must follow, like army privates, can’t wait to obey and please. If someone is superior to a dog it will obey more readily. If you are perceived as an inferior however, an alpha canine may view your directions or interference as insubordination. Just as insubordination in the military is punished, dog packs do not tolerate disobedience. Therefore, many people are often bitten by dogs when the dog perceives their behavior as acts of insubordination.

**Do become familiar with fight or flight behavior**

When in a confined space with people you don’t know, you minimize conflict by pretending they aren’t there. This is a conditioned response that you learned since you were an infant. Put a bunch of strange dogs in a small space and you can expect them not to simply ignore each other. Yet we think nothing of holding leashes tight, tying dogs up, fencing them off, putting them in cars and our homes. Dogs aren’t wired for confinement so expect many to have a negative reaction to being placed in what they think is imminent danger. Although the degree of response is individual we forget that we have been conditioned to tone ours down in order to cope with the amount of strangers we must interact with. We routinely walk by strange people or animals and ignore them. Yet are surprised when our dogs seem to turn vicious as they pass by. Be sensitive to what situations could make your dog feel that it must fight for its life to protect itself. People aren’t aware of their own conditioning so are not as sensitive as your dog. Ensure that they don’t make your dog feel cornered in a room or through their sudden actions.

**Don't**

**Do not give strangers control over your liability**

From the time you were little you were instructed on how to be polite to strangers. This can carry over with your dog. Many dog owners have watched as a stranger’s actions led to an incident. Moreover, they have watched as that same stranger sued them for what the stranger did to incite the dog's aggression. If someone suddenly reaches out to pat without asking your dog first, be ready to step in their way. If you are holding your small dog, its fine to forbid strangers to pat it-even if it means turning to avoid their reach. Using a muzzle can also ensure that if someone does something provocative to your dog, you and your dog are safe from their retribution. Don’t feel any guilt keeping your dog out of harm’s way. Your best bet is to be between someone and your dog. Always err on the side of caution, even it it means removing your dog or not bringing him in the first place.

**Do not allow anyone to hug your dog**

Hugging is a wonderful human gesture conveying love, support and comfort. Remember though, dogs do not hug each other. Dogs express love, comfort and support quite differently than hugging.  The only time one dog holds onto another is when they are mounting each other as a sign of dominance. If someone (often the owner) is perceived to be above the dog in status then the dog has to tolerate it. If someone (often a child) is perceived to be below the dog in status, then it can be a challenge to the dog’s rank in the group. When the dog stiffens its body, understand that this is a warning to stop hugging. Hugging is not bad behavior, but it is rather just evidence of miscommunication between species. It can be difficult to stop ingrained behavior, especially when it seems so endearing. Remember that even if it seems okay, or if you believe your dog would never bite, each interaction between your dog and another person is varied, and never uniform. Bottom line to avoid dog bites: no hugging!

**Do not expect your dog to be you**

Dogs drink muddy water, eat all sorts of vile matter and role in rotten carcasses. Is your dog able to balance your checkbook for you? Not unless you wait until their lower mammalian brains develop into our primate upper mammalian brains. Humans caninterpret, control and inhibit the effects of their surroundings and environments. Your dog has much less ability to do that. Yet we expect too much of our dogs. We expect dogs to act like dogs - and yet at times - we become frustrated when they do not act like us when interacting with others.  Keep in mind that your dog has limitations that are designed for survival in the wild, and not for the modern life of its human owner.

We also have a tendency to ask our dogs to be our substitute child one minute and our bodyguard the next. This is a confusing mixed message that dogs have difficulty shifting from one role to the other. Dog owners often feel at ease thinking their dog will protect them and their property. Unfortunately, we forget that dogs are wired to target the easy prey. Your dog is more likely to bite the newspaper carrier and pizza delivery person than an intruder. It’s best to always be your dog’s guide and understand their limitations. Look at situations and events from their perspective and think how something would benefit a wolf pack and not a human being.

**Do not allow anyone to handle your dog**

Like a horse, dogs know whether or not someone knows what they are doing. Dogs may take advantage of anyone who is unprepared. Problems can arise when someone cares for your dog and is able to handle your pet. Ignorance is not bliss. Many owners find out too late, when children are accosted by other dogs, friends are bitten when caring for your pet, or dogs hide for days under the deck until you come home. Like children, dog behavior changes depending on the leadership ability of their handlers. If someone has less skills and abilities with your dog than you, they will not be able to carefully handle your dog.

**Do not skimp on learning how to control your dog**

Dogs today spend more time sharing every minute of our lives. Yet many dog owners spend little of it learning how to navigate them safely through the human world. Dog training classes are great, but often model behavior in an artifically contained manner. Classes that focus on teaching you how to handle your dog in real life situations (dog handling instruction) allow you to receive vital coaching in real places that the two of you will actually go. Training any animal requires a level of proficiency that is not achieved when owners attend a 6-10 week dog training class. It is true that lower ranking dogs are easier to train than higher ranking ones. Yet having an easy dog does not mean that your handling skills are adequate. Similarly, horses are taught to accept a rider by a trainer. Furthermore, a riding instructor teaches the rider to ride the horse. Beginning riders are not charged with breaking horses. Give yourself some time to learn the skills necessary to enable you to keep your dog and others safe. Keep the protection of you and your dog in the forefront of your training exercises. You will have plenty of rewarding years to come with your dog if you invest more time in training.

**Summary**



The state of dog ownership has changed dramatically in the last 60 years. From the dog living outside and eating our scraps to now being valued by their owners as children, dogs have shifted their position from farm animal to best friend.  But even so, we are still failing our “best friends”. By romanticizing dogs as universally "man's best friend", we have not only ignored their natural diversity, but we have routinely demonized those dogs that don’t fit into our modern and artificial expectations. Dog owners are caught in a cruel standoff by following societal messages about how to interact with dogs, then are punished and sued when their dogs react negatively. To protect your beloved friend and ensure you secure your liability, it is wise to understand how dogs view the world. Their motivations stem from their natural instincts, not from human sensibilities or social mores. Take charge to protect your pet from human actions. Teach people how to interact with your dog and allow them to do so properly and safely. Have the foresight to remove your dog from questionable situations or add a muzzle so that incidents can be avoided altogether. Dog behavior is largely predictable, and the particular behavior depends on whether there is an interaction with people or animals. with friends or foes, or with family or strangers.  Avoid the old stereotypical thinking that the dogs are at fault.

Be on the defensive against any threats to your relationship with your beloved friend and you will ensure a long and rewarding relationship.

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