

Puppy Aggression

A puppy's chances of developing aggressive behavior depend both on genetics and on how people handle their puppies. Much of dog behavior is genetically based and will not be overcome by training. Training has great power to change a dog, though. Every experience teaches a pup what to expect from people and from the world, and how to get needs met. The most teachable months in a puppy's life pass quickly. How can we make the best use of this short time?

What behavior from a puppy constitutes aggression? Broken skin on a human is one cause for concern. If your puppy breaks the skin on a human—whether someone in the family or not, whether in play or not—be sure to get started promptly with a veterinary behavior specialist or other expert who can assess the situation.

The first question is whether there are children in the home or as regular visitors. If so, you need an expert opinion as to whether the pup is safe around kids.

If this pup is not safe around children and is expertly judged as likely to remain high risk even with training, sometimes the best thing is to place the puppy while still little and cute and easily able to transition to a more suitable home. People don't want to do this, because puppies are cute and bring out our parental, protective feelings. If you wait until a child has been seriously hurt, though, the dog is likely to be a gawky adolescent, now with a bite record, and no real option other than euthanasia.

A responsible breeder will take back pups and provide them with proper care. The breeder is the pup's best life insurance for a secure future. In the event your puppy doesn't have a responsible breeder standing ready to help, check first with the source from which you obtained the pup. They placed the pup once (with you) and likely can easily place the pup again while still little and cute. Be totally honest about the reason, so the puppy can be placed in the RIGHT home and no one else's children will be at risk.

If you decide to work on the problems, the behavior specialist can prescribe a behavior modification program. Some puppies benefit from medication, which only a veterinarian can prescribe. Most of all, everyone in the family has to learn how to handle the puppy properly. It requires long-term commitment, as successful dog parenting always does.

Prevention

Ideally of course you want to handle your puppy to avoid aggression from developing in the first place. What does this entail? How might it be different from our instinctive human reactions to puppy misdeeds?

1. Create a foundation of training in your puppy. Instead of punishing a puppy for puppy crimes, train for the behavior you desire. Get the help of a class instructor, private trainer or behavior specialist to learn what behaviors your puppy needs to learn and how to help your puppy learn them.

Make training fun for the puppy, and put in the practice time every day. Then when your puppy misbehaves, you can immediately switch into one of the trained behaviors and have the puppy doing the right thing instead of the wrong thing. With consistent practice, your puppy will eventually develop the habit of doing the desired behavior instead of the undesired one. That's training at its best.

2. Teach your puppy to give you things, rather than manhandling or cornering a frightened dog. When pups steal human possessions and run off to get the people to engage in a chasing game, most people instinctively do the wrong thing and chase the pup. The pup is playing, but the people get angry about damage to possessions, and take their anger out on the pup.

Soon the pup becomes either fearful or aggressive in self-protection when cornered by humans, and more and more situations cause that trapped feeling. At the same time, the people are missing an easy chance to build the pup's retrieving response. Encourage the pup to bring the item to you by running the other way, and then trade the pup something nice for the item. Before you know it, you'll have a dog that retrieves to you. And you'll have fun in the process.

3. Whenever you need to get your pup to do something, use your voice and body language to give directions. Don't manhandle the pup. Make your touch a positive thing.

You want your pup to trust the touch of humans and to relax when touched. This is not the instinctive response of a dog or even of a person—the instinctive response to touch is defensive. A positive response to touch is learned. It takes a lot of good touches to develop this positive response, and it also requires protecting the pup from painful or frightening touches.

4. Instead of grabbing, jerking, and jumping around with your puppy, slow things down so the dog can stop and think. Don't let anyone encourage your puppy to put teeth on human skin. Teach everyone to treat the puppy in a way that will build your puppy's trust in people and safe responses to them.

5. Don't let people pet the puppy when the pup is jumping up on them. Everyone needs to "freeze action" whenever the puppy gets mouthy with teeth on a human or otherwise too wild. As soon as the pup settles down, pet then so the puppy learns that calm behavior is the best way to get human attention.

6. Don't try to show a puppy you're the boss. A good leader just IS one, and doesn't have to go around proving it. Dogs come hard-wired with this understanding as part of their ability to live in a pack. If you act like you need to prove to your pup that you are the leader, the message the pup gets is that you doubt your position as leader. Training, grooming, good handling and care of your puppy are how you establish effective leadership.

7. If your pup reacts inappropriately and tries sassing you, don't overreact. Instead, stand your ground and give the youngster time to realize those tactics just don't work with you. Don't fight with your dog, and don't back down. Fighting triggers the dog to fight back, and backing down teaches the dog that it is effective to push you. Either of these choices can lead to aggression that escalates over time.

Direct the dog into an appropriate behavior you've been working on together. Use your voice and body language, but avoid touching the pup. Touch at this point could trigger a defensive reaction in the pup, while directing the dog without touch gives the pup a chance to choose to acknowledge you as leader.

8. When you must correct your pup quickly to interrupt an unsafe behavior, instantly shift the pup into a desirable behavior you can reward. This helps the dog learn that a correction from you actually means something good is coming. At the same time, the pup is learning that you don't allow unacceptable behavior to continue. Dogs thrive on learning limits in this manner. It's great for their mental health, because they were designed to live in a structured pack with leadership clearly defined.

9. Don't let anyone mistreat your puppy. You can't wait for a reaction from the puppy to show you when a person's behavior is out of line, because puppy defense instincts are immature and they do not clearly show how they feel. Instead, the reaction shows up as they mature into defense instincts, after the damage has been done.

It's up to you to make sure people treat your puppy well. Your goal is for the pup to grow up believing there is no need to defend against people in general. If you want a protection-trained dog, do that later with the right expert help. The puppy needs to first be raised with a stable temperament and attitude toward the general public, whether the eventual goal is family companion dog, police dog, or both.

10. Provide your puppy with lots of positive social experiences. Make these experiences short and pleasant for the pup, especially at first. Overwhelming a puppy causes the dog to feel fearful and defensive about the world, rather than building the confidence and trust that is the goal of socializing a puppy.

11. Condition your puppy that the approach of humans when the puppy is eating or chewing a toy is a good thing, not a threat. Give an extra treat during meals, give the dog a treat for letting you hold the chew toy for a minute and then hand back the toy, and otherwise work on making this a pleasant experience.

Nature or Nurture?

Humans inherit many behavioral traits from ancestors, but humans have more mental capacity to override their instincts with reasoned behavior than dogs have. You can help your pup to be as safe as possible with humans, but genetics impose some limitations on how much good training and handling can achieve.

If at any point you become concerned that your pup's behavior is taking a dangerous direction, seek the help of a behavior specialist promptly. Appropriate action in the pup's early months can be the key to happily ever after for you and for your pup.