

# The Doggone Truth

Things you should know before adopting a dog

Written by Sheila Kamath of Integral Dog Training in collaboration with  
Animal Rescue Konnection (c) 2022

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# Are You Ready to Adopt?

You're reading this because you love and adore dogs and you want to help a dog live a safe and happy life. But before you take the plunge, there are some things that you should ask yourself to ensure that you're ready to make this big commitment. Do you really have what it takes, or do you simply like the feeling of having a dog?

First, you should know yourself. This includes your strengths and weaknesses, your abilities and inabilities. Be honest with yourself. No one is judging you, we all know that no one is perfect. But, it's important to really know what you can and can't do. Will you be able to wake up every morning at 5:00 a.m. to walk the 2 year old Vizsla you're interested in? Will you be able to control that 150 lb Newfie? Will you have the patience to deal with an older dog's behavioral issues? Do you have the time, the energy, the money, the motivation and the interest to take on the protection and care of this new life?

Know your family and environment. Is your household hectic and full of people? Is your household very regimented and calm? Do you go on long vacations or trips? Do your children know how to interact with a dog, or are you willing to teach them? You can't expect the dog to know how to interact with kids either. Do you have elderly family members who must be protected from jumpers? Do you live on a busy street? Do you have access to a place to play and walk? Will your new dog have enough space?

Dogs require resources. Do you have the resources to provide training, grooming, veterinary visits, insurance, day care, food, medicine, toys, treats, gates, leashes, collars, beds, crates... the list goes on and on. And that's not even counting the things that pop up in emergencies. It takes a village to raise a dog, but you have to pay those villagers. Although, when you have a dog, you can take all of the money that you would have spent on those luxurious international vacations and use them on your dog instead.

The biggest component of having what it takes is follow through. If you make a commitment to a dog, can you keep it? Will you continue the medical treatments the dog needs? Will you continue providing the resources, training, structure, management or anything else that the dog needs? Can you put yourself in the dog's shoes and feel empathy for him or her? Can you know that there are going to be good days and bad days and still be excited about being with this new dog?

Can you give the dog the time he or she needs to decompress? There's no secret to how long it'll take for your dog to adjust to a new environment. Can you deal with it if the dog needs space and time to meet new people and new dogs? What if the dog never likes meeting new people or animals? Are you prepared to help him or her by managing the environment and setting up protective and safe places? Are you willing to understand what the dog needs? What about helping the new family member learn to adjust to your household, family, friends, neighbors, neighborhood, car, noises, squirrels, you name it. Can you help your dog when he or she is scared, anxious or nervous? Can you deal with him or her when she's overexcited, angry or being belligerent (yes, dogs can be jerks sometimes).

Or, will you make excuses or blame the dog for inappropriate behavior during the early stages of adjustment. Because some dogs feel uncertain about their new environment, he may growl, or lunge, or snap. Will you give up or try to understand why the dog is acting out? You may think you got more than you expected or say he needs more than you can give him, but that's giving up. You made a commitment, but will you see it through and not return your dog (or worse euthanize) if trouble begins. Seek help as soon as something doesn't feel right.

Honestly, you don't have to answer yes to all of these questions. But you should have spent some time thinking about your answers. You need to give the dog you adopt the benefit of considering all of these things because the dog's life is counting on you. When a dog is returned for not living up to the adopter's expectations, the dog has a mark against him. Worse, the dog is disrupted again by being returned, and if adopted again, he or she has yet another stressful transition to bear.

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# Your Dog, Your Responsibility

As a trainer, sometimes I think people want me to wave my hands and magically make their dog “perfect.” Honestly, if I could do that, I wouldn’t be here. But that doesn’t mean I don’t understand what you’re going through. I wish I could wave my hands and make my dog perfect, too.

You come home from a long day at work, and the last thing you want to do is, well, anything. But your partner, kids, dog, neighbor, and family all want your attention. Sometimes they want to do something you want to do (Taco Tuesday!) and other times not (can you remember what a quadratic equation is?) But, because you love them, you’re willing to do what they ask. But what if they’re not asking?

Your dog might ask you to play ball or feed her, but she’s not going to ask you to show her how to greet people correctly, or what to do when the vacuum cleaner is running. But you need to teach your dog these things and more. Just as having a child means that you have to continually be teaching them, a dog requires constant instruction during their first few years. And if they don’t get that instruction? They make it up themselves. That’s why your dog jumps on people when they come into the house. Or they don’t know how to act at the groomers. Or they chew on your furniture and not their toys.

Dogs are smart, and they want to be part of the pack. As pack leader, your responsibility is to show your dog what you expect from her in every situation. Every situation. Your pup is like a blank canvas and you have to create a masterpiece. Everyone’s masterpiece is different. You might like Vermeer, and your mother may prefer Georgia O’Keefe. That’s why it’s important that you train your dog and show her how to be like a girl with a pearl earring and your mother has to show her dog how to be a giant white flower.

Training is very personal. My dogs know not to talk to me until I’ve had my usual vat of coffee. Your dog might have to learn not to talk to you until you get off the Peleton. How does your dog learn that when you’re sweating on your bike that you’re not interested in playing ball? If you don’t teach her, you can’t get too upset when she keeps dropping a soggy tennis ball on you. If you don’t teach your dog your house rules, she’s not responsible for not knowing them. It’s hard to integrate a dog into your life, but you’re the only one who can do it.

You have a big responsibility when you have a family or a dog. Not teaching your children how to integrate into your family could impact their ability to interact with polite society. Not teaching your dog manners could result in your dog paying for your oversight with his life.

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# What Dogs Teach Us

Whenever you bring a dog into your life, they teach you something. Sometimes it's an easy lesson, sometimes it's a hard lesson. Here are a few of the lessons that some Animal Rescue Konnection (ARK) dogs taught us. Dog names that have an asterix (\*) have had their names changed to protect their identity.

**Johnny** is a sweet older dog that was surrendered to a doggy day care, which, because he had not been socialized with other dogs, was pretty traumatic. A lot of people worked very hard to understand what Johnny needed and were able to find the perfect adopter. Johnny taught us that it takes a village to rescue a dog.

**Rover\*** is an energetic dog that was not getting along with his human siblings. The family decided that removing Rover from their home was the best option. After some training we were able to teach the family that Rover's personal space needed to be respected. Rover taught us that sometimes a dog is surrendered because of something that the humans are doing, not the dog.

**Bosco\*** is another good boy that was not meshing well with his human siblings. Much like Rover's family, Bosco was going to be rehomed, although he'd been living with his family for 7 years. We taught the family how to communicate with Bosco and to understand what Bosco was telling them. Bosco taught us that dogs are dogs, and we should expect them to act like dogs, not like humans. Bosco wasn't doing anything wrong, but his communication was being misinterpreted.

**Jacques\*** is a dog that is beyond lucky. He was rescued by a good samaritan from an incredibly dangerous and malicious person who threatened to publically kill him. Jacques, who is still a puppy, obviously has some PTSD from his violent experiences, and various shelters recommended euthanizing him, believing that rehabilitation would be impossible. Jacques taught us that dogs are resilient and despite what they've been put through, they can still trust. Jacques is now living the life of Riley and learning that not all people are scary.

**Benny\*** is a dog that was rescued from another bad situation. He was rehomed with an elderly couple who thought that they had what Benny needed. Unfortunately, they didn't. Benny is a large lab who had traumatic experiences in his past, and needed support. It causes a lot of anguish to go to a home for a few days and get returned. Benny taught us that we have to be realistic about our capabilities because when we decide to help a dog we are literally taking their life into our hands.

**Violet\*** is a dog who was also incredibly lucky in the end. She was adopted out to a person who didn't know their limitations, too. She was returned to the shelter and immediately put on death row. She was given 48 hours to find someone before she would be euthanized. The adopter told the shelter that something had happened and the shelter didn't have the resources to verify the story. This unfairly labeled Violet as an "aggressive" dog. No other shelters would help Violet, and she was deemed "unadoptable." Violet taught us that we need to be very careful about what we say about dogs. Words that are incorrectly used to describe dogs can have a lethal effect on them. We need to be aware that sticks and stones can break our bones but words can lead to euthanasia.

Every dog we meet has a story. And every single one of them teaches us something. What have you learned from your dog?

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# Greetings from the Dog

Did you know that in Denmark, if you are still single by the age of 25, your family and friends will splash you with water and cover you from head to toe with cinnamon? Or in India it's good luck to be hit over the head with a coconut? Everyone has heard about strange customs at some point, but imagine if you're a dog and you're trying to understand human customs?

Dogs like to greet each other by licking one end and sniffing the other. Humans don't. Humans like to greet each other by shaking hands or hugging. This isn't natural for dogs, so we have to teach them how to appropriately greet humans. And, with humans, there are differences between how they need to greet various people. For example, a wagging tail can send a toddler flying and a big sloppy kiss may not be appreciated by Grandma.

As a parent, either to dogs or humans, you spend a great deal of time indoctrinating them to the ways of the world. You taught your children the appropriate way to meet people, and you need to teach your dog the same lessons. If you don't teach them how to appropriately greet people, they're going to try and figure it out themselves. Just because they decide that jumping up on the person and trying to lick their face or grab someone's hand and try and pull them to the couch doesn't mean that your dog is aggressive. It means that they're excited and can barely contain themselves. As humans, we experience that joy when someone we love comes into the house, but we learn to temper that with manners as we get older.

Some dogs are very mouthy. They've been designed to be mouthy. Retrievers, specifically, were designed to enjoy holding things, even dead ducks, in their mouths. My shepherd gets excited when I get home and grabs my hand and pulls me to the couch because she wants to catch up on our day. Dogs use their mouths because they don't have opposable thumbs. If a dog could grab a hand with her paw and pull you to the couch, she would. But she can't, so she uses her mouth.

It's not unusual for people to say that dog teeth should never be on human skin. But that is a misgeneralization. Did you know that when a dog grooms you it's one of the most respectful things that he can do to you? That little nibbling of their front teeth up and down your arm hurts, but it's the biggest compliment your pup can give you. You're his pack and he's grooming you - he loves you. And, my dog bringing me to the couch? She's not being aggressive, maybe a bit bossy, but not aggressive. You have to understand their actions in context with their intention.

Training your dog how you want to be treated when you come into the house, and how you don't want to be treated is the only way to ensure that your dog understands what you want. Dogs don't automatically understand what they should be doing in every situation. You, as the human, have to be the one that tells them what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. And, you have to make sure that whatever you tell them is specific to your environment.

Your dog will want to fit in and do what is expected. Imagine that you find your single self in Denmark on your 25th birthday. You probably don't expect to be doing an impersonation of a cinnamon roll, but, if that's what other people expect of you, that's what you do!

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# Socializing Your Dog

Have you ever read about Feral Children? The kids who were raised by wolves? When they finally returned to civilization, they were wild, frightened, and unsocialized. They had to learn how to eat with utensils, wear clothes, and talk to people.

What is socialization? It's learning how to fit into a society. Dogs need socialization to learn how to fit into our society, and guess what? You're the person who has to teach them!

Socialization means a lot of different things. You want to socialize your dog with other dogs so they learn how to interact. Dogs are very social animals, and they have strict rules and procedures for interactions. For example, staring is very rude in dog language. However, sniffing a butt isn't. Leaning on you is an ownership behavior - you're mine! - but grooming your arm is one of the most loving things a dog can do to you.

You also want to socialize your dog with all types of people. Tall people, short people, people of different colors. If you have no kids in your family, you need to teach your dog how to interact with children. You need to teach your dog how to interact with elders, too. One thing about people is that they dress differently. Some dogs are sensitive to people in uniform. It's a good idea to teach your dog to feel comfortable around police, firefighters, delivery drivers, vets, doctors, girl scouts, etc.

Socializing your dog with other animals is also important. You might live with a cat, or a bird. You might have goats in pajamas, or a pot bellied pig. Introducing your dog to other animals ensures that he greets them correctly and doesn't try to eat them. And, socializing also means environments. Urban areas are a lot different than suburban or rural settings. Walking along a beach or in the woods are other environments your dog might never have encountered before.

Don't forget to socialize your dog with objects. Introducing your dog to things like a vacuum cleaner, lawn mower, bike, etc. will allow you to teach him how to act around them. However, some dogs can begin to fear familiar things out of the blue. Trash barrels are a good example. They've walked by them every day and then - BANG - the barrels have turned to beasts!

Lastly, socialization means situations. One day in the fall, your doorbell is going to start ringing like crazy, and when you open the door, there are going to be all sorts of monsters and witches. Or, one day in winter, you may bring an actual tree into your living room. That's like indoor plumbing to a dog! You have to think of these situations as something totally strange to your dog, and introduce him to them so he knows what to do.

Socializing your dog means teaching them the expected behavior for whenever they encounter a specific person, animal, situation, or environment. You need to teach them before they experience it and take their own actions. Think of your dog as a French exchange student who you're hosting. If you introduce them to things, they will surely have that *Joie de Vivre*.

As your dog's guardian, you must see the world from his view as much as you see the world from your view. So, take a minute and think of all of the people, animals, situations, and environments that you've introduced your dog to. If you're drawing a blank, then you've done your dog a disservice. But, it's never too late to start. You just have to make time, have patience, and use treats to introduce your dog to your world. If your dog isn't familiarized with anything, your dog isn't to blame. You are.

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# Teach Your Dog to Go Say Hi

Long ago, when you were a small child, your parents probably told you how to greet your family members when they came to visit you. They probably told you to go give your grandparents a hug and a kiss, to not kick your cousins and to be careful not to trip over Aunt Edna's cane.

Similarly, your dog's family taught him how to greet when he was a puppy. You should lick your elders' lips, you should be face level when you say hi, and be sure to respectfully sniff Aunt Edna's butt.

When your dog does all of the greeting behaviors he was taught, he thinks that he's doing everything right. But how does he know that he's doing anything wrong? Suddenly everyone is jumping up and down, barking and trying to stop him from respectfully acknowledging Aunt Edna.

If you want your dog to act differently during a situation, it's your responsibility to teach him what you need. If you want him to sit on the floor and wait for people to come up to him, you need to teach him how. If you want him to go into the living room and turn off the lights so that you can hide, you have to teach him that, too. If you don't teach him what you want, he's going to do what he learned earlier.

Your dog wants to do whatever his pack is doing, he wants to fit in and do the right thing. But, he can't read your mind, so you have to teach him what's expected in each new situation. That's why we teach a command called Go Say Hi.

This command puts you in charge...of everything. You have to take control of both your dog and of Aunt Edna. For example, Aunt Edna comes to the door and starts fawning all over your dog. You have to ask her to step back and tell her what you'd like her to do.

"Aunt Edna, we're training Bluto. Could you help us? I'm going to give you a cookie and ask Bluto to Go Say Hi to you. When he sits in front of you, you can give him the cookie and pet him on the chest. If he starts to jump, just take a step back. Ready?" Then you tell Bluto to Go Say Hi by guiding him to Aunt Edna, and asking him to sit. When Bluto sits, he gets his cookie.

If Aunt Edna is inadvertently encouraging Bluto, you have to speak up. "I'm so glad that you're excited to meet Bluto, Aunt Edna, but can you stop waving your cane up in the air? Bluto thinks you're playing." My 80 year old grandmother once got on the floor and crawled under my dining room table to say hello to my timid German Shepherd puppy. That conversation went "Grams, please let me help you up off the floor, Nora will come to you when she's ready." If there's too much activity, for example the entire side of the family from Arizona is showing up, it might be better for Bluto to be in a room far from the maddening crowd, and to slowly introduce him to one or two people at a time.

Bottom line is you have to teach your dog how to interact with people. You have to show him what's appropriate and what's inappropriate. Encourage him to do what you need with praise and attention. When he's jumping on people, redirect him and reward him when he's doing what you'd like. You're your dog's liaison and interpreter, but if you don't tell him what to do, he's going to do the dance of a thousand sniffs with Aunt Edna.

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# Train Your Kids Before Your Dog Does!

Dogs rarely do things for no reason. If your dog “suddenly and unprovoked” reacted towards a child, he felt he had a reason. Dogs are social creatures and therefore have strict social rules.

When a dog feels that they have to correct a litter mate (otherwise known as your child) they might tag them. This means that they’re telling a family member that they’re doing something wrong and should stop. Sometimes that something wrong is pulling a tail or grabbing something out of their mouth. Sometimes it is something that they shouldn’t be correcting anyone for, like wanting to sit on a couch or trying to walk through the kitchen with a pop tart. If your child is trying to ride your dog, your child might end up getting tagged with a correction. Unfortunately, for many dogs, people think it’s easier to remove the dog instead of taking steps to train the child.

It’s true, some instances warrant training the dog. (This usually also includes training the child.) If a dog has taken it upon themselves to train your children, this is where you should step in and train the children yourself. And show the dog that you are the one that trains the children...and trains the dog. It’s not a matter of “having to keep my child safe” from a dog. It’s “having to teach my child how to correctly interact with another species.” This is you providing your child with life skills.

Humans and dogs have a very long history and close relationship. But you have to remember that they are also animals. There are very few species that we invite into our homes and treat the same as we treat other humans. We forget that they’re dogs, not humans.

If your dog and your child have an “altercation,” your responsibility is to everyone involved. Your dog is your family, too. Finding out what you can do to help them get along, or to make sure that something like this doesn’t happen again can be a long and involved process, and you should definitely seek professional help. But don’t take the easy way out and just get rid of a family member. Imagine if that were the standard operating procedure for dealing with sibling rivalry in humans. You might be the one sitting in a small room wondering what happened.

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## Preferences for Other Dogs and Kids

How do you feel about food? Are you into Indian food? Or do you prefer Italian? You can have several different preferences, and things that you gravitate towards. And, just because you like one type of cuisine, doesn't mean that you hate others. Conversely, just because you love Thai food doesn't mean you'll like Chinese food.

Dogs are the same. They prefer Thai food over Chinese food. Just kidding, they don't really care, but, they do have preferences about people they'd like to hang out with. My husband's dog hates other dogs. But she loves people. My dog hates people, but he loves other dogs. They both love the cat, but it's an unrequited love.

If your dog doesn't like other dogs, does that mean he won't like people? If your dog loves kids, does that mean she will love other dogs? Nope. Just because you love koalas doesn't mean you love your mother-in-law. There's no correlation between liking dogs and liking kids. It's more likely that your dog learned to like or dislike something because of the way you introduced him to it. If your dog was attacked by another dog in the neighborhood, chances are he won't be very thrilled to be around other dogs. Similarly, if you let children climb all over your dog, your dog won't be excited to deal with kids. If you taught your dog how to interact with adults, dogs, and kids, then your dog might be more comfortable with them.

So, if your dog gets into it with another dog, does that mean that your kids are in danger? Probably not. Before you make any decisions, it's important to understand why your dog did what he did. Did the other dog give him the hairy eyeball? Did the other dog bark or lunge first? Was there food involved? Or a toy? Were the dogs playing and then things went south? Was there humping involved? How old is your dog? How old was the other dog? Do these dogs have a history or are they strangers? Was it a corrective action or was it full on warfare? Talking with a canine professional can help identify the answers to these questions and figure out what happened and what may happen in the future.

Similarly, if your kids understand what caused your dog to snap (literally) then they can do things to avoid ticking off your dog. If your dog got into a tussle with another dog over food, it would be a good thing to teach your kids how to interact with your dog when food is involved - don't! And if your dog is possessive of his toys when another dog is near, then teaching your kids not to rip his toys out of his mouth is important. If your child is humping the dog, then, well, you might have bigger problems. But, teaching your kids the appropriate way to interact with your dog, especially if you know that your dog has triggers, is important. If one of your children hates getting tickled and the other kids torment her by tickling her incessantly, you'd step in and say something, right? Your dog has the right to be treated with the same respect that you'd give to your children.

If you talk to a canine professional, they will guide you as to what you should do. They may assess your dog and determine that he will be fine with kids. Or, they may suggest that your kids be taught to interact with your dog correctly. As a trainer, I've suggested everything from anxiety meds for the dogs when they interact with other dogs, to anxiety meds for the humans.

Before anyone makes any decisions about the future of your relationship with your dog, make sure that you know all of the information. This includes information about the other dog, the situation, the props involved, etc. When your child gets into a fight at school, you, as a parent, want all of the facts before you make any decisions. And, because your child bit a kid at school, does that mean your dog is in danger?

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# Canine Fear

It's 3 o'clock in the morning and you are woken with a loud bang coming from the kitchen. It's dark, you're alone, and you feel the fear coursing through your veins. You grab the baseball bat you keep by your bed and slowly open the door to your bedroom. As you walk up the hallway to the kitchen, you hear more and more noises, like drawers being opened and chairs being moved. You hear someone say something to someone else and...you freeze.

Humans have three instinctive responses to fear. Flight, Freeze, or Fight. When I was 8, I was delivering papers in the dark at 5 a.m. and I thought I saw Bigfoot. I was literally frozen in place for what felt like hours. I couldn't move for about 5 minutes. Or people run. You know those first responders who always run towards the excitement while we're all running away? Or, there are some people who just hold their ground and fight.

Dogs are the same. They have a fight, freeze, or flight response, too. Something that scares them will cause one of these three reactions. This is typically seen when a dog is on a leash.

"I don't understand why he acts like this on leash. He loves dogs. He goes to daycare and plays." Well, Wimpy is dealing with some fear. He can't run away, so he has to act big and scary so that the other dog steers clear. If Wimpy could flee, he'd have more confidence in dealing with the other dog. This reactivity is a form of fear aggression. Or fear reactivity.

Maybelle is a great dog, but when some people come into the house, she growls at them. "She's met Uncle Roy several times, but she growls at him every time he comes over. She's fine after a while, but it's like she's never met him before." Maybelle is afraid of Uncle Roy. Maybe he smells like mothballs. Maybe it's because he's over 6 feet tall and has a beard. Maybe it's because he's always wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap. For whatever reason, Maybelle is afraid. She's warning Uncle Roy to stay away from her until she feels safe.

Dogs go through multiple fear stages in their lives. One of my dogs became petrified of stumps. It took some work to get her past this fear, because, come on - who isn't afraid of stumps? If a dog isn't helped with their fear during this stage, they might be afraid of the object for the rest of their lives.

This is where you, as the human, come in. If you see that your dog is afraid, it's up to you to do something about it. When humans become terrified of something, they see therapists. If your dog is afraid of something, working with a vet, a behaviorist or a trainer is important. Expecting your dog to "snap out of it" or "get over it" or "work it through" is disingenuous. You have to teach your dog what to do in situations that scare him, be compassionate and understanding and, most importantly, nurture the trust that your dog has in you.

You know that a stump isn't going to hurt you or your dog, so you work to help your pup overcome that fear. You also know that Uncle Roy probably won't hurt Maybelle, so you work to help her overcome her fear of Uncle Roy. Sorry, but there's nothing you can do to help me with my fear of Bigfoot.

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# Adolescent Dogs

Teenagers are the worst. They're a big bundle of confidence, fear, hormones and hubris. Adolescence is messy, even for dogs. Luckily, dogs don't go through 7 years of adolescence, although it can certainly feel that way.

Adolescence for dogs depends on their breeds. Smaller dogs get to and go through adolescence quickly, while large breeds take more time. Knowing that your dog is a teenager is something that you should keep in mind when you're dealing with his or her sudden belligerence and unpredictability.

Dogs are pack animals, meaning that in the wild, they live in a social order. That social order is fluid, but there are dogs that like to be in charge and those that would rather not. As a puppy, your dog was at the bottom of the pile. As your dog grows, he has to try and challenge others so that he can "rise up" in the pack. This means that your dog is looking for someone to boss around.

During this time, your dog is also trying to be what he considers to be "an adult". An adult doesn't have to listen to anyone. An adult can decide who has permission to do things. An adult can decide when and what they eat. An adult can't be bossed around. Of course, this is wrong, but your teenage dog doesn't know that.

Your dog, as a teenager, is going to try and press your buttons. He's going to try and push his boundaries. He's going to try and see what he can get away with. He's going to just generally be a butthead. He's not going to listen to anyone. He'd rather be at the mall with his friends. He can't be bothered being part of a family. Until he decides he needs snuggles and ear rubs..

The shelters are full of teenage dogs. This is the most common age to give up a dog. That cute adorable compliant puppy has become an apathetic terror who is trying to boss everyone around. Suddenly your dog has forgotten every single command you've ever taught him. He's chewed up the blanket that's been in his crate for 8 months. He's reacting to dogs he sees on the streets. He's trying to hump the cat.

Even though it's difficult, remember that this is a phase. All dogs go through this, and they usually return to the loveable dog you remember. While your dog is going through adolescence, you have to deal accordingly. Be a little more specific about what you want. Be more exacting in what they give. Set your boundaries a little tighter. Don't give them the leeway that they're trying to force you to give. You don't have to become a tyrant, but you might have to start channeling a drill sergeant for a while. Be patient with both yourself and your dog. Hormones aren't fun.

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# Biting vs. Aggression

Is it aggression when a dog bites? Or is it just a sign that training is needed?

A dog bite is a scary thing. It's never good when a dog's teeth come in contact with a person's skin. And though it's understandable that you're scared and angry, it helps to understand why your dog acted this way.

Was your dog asleep and your child jumped on him? Was your dog trying to tell you to stay off of "her" couch? Was your dog terrified of something and bit you when you tried to comfort him? Was your dog guarding his food or toy? Did you get bitten when trying to separate two dogs? Each one of these situations causes a different reaction and provides a different reason for the bite, but true aggression is not one of them.

## Instinct

Your dog is sleeping in his favorite spot and your child wants to snuggle. Your son plops himself down on the bed next to Rover and hugs him. Your dog's instinct is to wake up fighting. He has no idea what is happening, regardless if it's happened before. Imagine being woken up by your accountant crawling into bed with you. You'd be shocked, scared, surprised, angry, confused, stunned - all in the matter of a few seconds. Similarly, your dog is feeling the same emotions and reacts instinctively. This is not aggressiveness, this is a dog being surprised while sleeping.

## Possession

Your dog is on the couch, watching her favorite show. You come in and sit down next to her and she growls at you. When you go to pet her to calm her down, she nips you. Dogs use their mouths to make corrections. She's telling you that you're not allowed to sit on the couch, and when you try and snuggle up to her, she isn't having it. She's correcting you by tagging you. Tagging is when a dog hits and pinches you with their teeth. Sometimes their mouths are open, sometimes they're not. Dogs tag each other to provide corrections. In your dog's mind, you did something wrong and she needs to let you know. This can be a form of resource guarding and through training your dog's actions can be modified.

## Guarding

Your dog is eating and you walk by. Your dog growls and lunges at you. We call this resource guarding, and is fairly common, especially in dogs that had to fight for food from littermates or competitors. Dogs guard resources such as food, water, high value treats, toys, wood chips, people, etc.. For some reason, your dog feels that they have to stop you from taking their resource away. A dog that guards can be retrained to allow these resources to be removed or replaced.

## Fear

Dogs, when they feel threatened or in danger, will lash out to protect themselves. We might think that putting a dog in a bathtub for a bath is something trivial, but to a dog who has never been bathed or who is afraid of water, this is a life threatening act. They want to prevent getting into this situation at all costs. Fear is something that, through training, can be mitigated. A dog can be desensitized to things that cause fear and reactivity.

## Reactivity

Was your dog barking or lunging at another dog and then suddenly turned and bit you? This is frustration on your dog's part, and he's taking that frustration out on you. As with fear, training helps a reactive dog learn to deal with the frustration that is causing them to be reactive. Dogs are reactive for a number of reasons, but mostly because they're afraid. Helping a dog realize that they're safe, giving them the confidence to deal with the scary object and giving them options are ways to train reactive dogs.

## Protection

Your dog is a member of the pack. You are a member of the pack. When your dog believes that your pack is threatened, she might feel the need to protect the pack. That means you. She could be protecting you from your husband as he tickles you, your mother as she hugs you or your big scary, hair brother when he comes into the house. Your dog doesn't know the difference between an axe murderer and your brother. As the person who leads the pack, you have to let your dog know that you'll take care of any interlopers and that you'll call on her when you need help.

## New People

This is kind of related to protection. When your dog meets a new person, unless you take control of the situation and introduce your dog correctly, it can be confusing. The person might smell of mothballs, or be 200 feet tall and wearing a hat. Or they might have some crazy energy that seems threatening. Your dog will take his cue from you, so if you're nervous because the new person in the house is your mother-in-law, your dog will be nervous and may try and help you out. Training your dog to meet new people prevents a lot of missteps from your dog.

Understanding why your dog acted the way he did makes the situation a little less scary. Most "aggression" is really a reaction or a response to something that occurred. It's rare for a dog to randomly become aggressive.

*Written by Sheila of Integral Dog Training in collaboration with Animal Rescue Konnection (c) 2022.*

# No! Don't Leave Me!

Dogs are pack animals. That means they are social animals who thrive in environments where they interact with others. Not many species on earth will consider another species to be a part of their family group, but dogs and cats are two exceptions.

So, you're part of a pack. As a pack member, you have some responsibilities. The pack is very much "One for All and All for One!" Privately, you might squabble for that last bone, but publicly you are a united front. You know that Mom isn't approachable until she's had her coffee in the morning, and if Dad gets McDonalds on his way home, most of the fries will be gone. You know that there is safety in numbers and that leaving someone alone is a form of punishment.

Wait, you didn't know that? In the canine world, a dog without a pack is, well, in danger. The worst thing you can do to a dog is kick him out of the pack. Imagine if your family accidentally left you behind all alone in your huge house on Christmas while they took a vacation? How would you eat? How would you keep yourself safe? How would you survive??

Some dogs get something called separation anxiety. That's really a single term for a lot of different things of varying severity. It's an umbrella term for a dog that gets stressed, angry, or wild when left alone. If you think your dog has separation anxiety, don't despair. There are things that you, as a pack member, can do to help.

First, you need to determine if your dog really has separation anxiety. If you leave the house and your dog has free range of the house, your dog may just be bored. Shredded sofas, door jambs pulled off the wall and garbage strewn all over the kitchen indicates a wild time was had by all. Was it done vindictively? Maybe at first, but then it became so much fun that your heinous action of leaving was forgotten.

The cure for this kind of activity is teaching your dog to enjoy being in a crate. Or, by confining your party animal to a secure dog-proofed room. Additionally, giving your pup something productive to do will provide some fun and focus.

On the other side of the scale, you might come back to a home or crate filled with vomit, diarrhea, or other body fluids. Your dog might have barked for the entire time that you were gone, eaten their crate mat, or punched a hole in the crate door. This is extreme separation anxiety that can be caused by a number of different things. The fix is the same regardless of the cause. It includes some combination of medication, desensitization, patience, support, and training.

Separation anxiety also includes various degrees of anger, frustration, FOMO, and fear. Each dog is unique and each situation is different. You might not have taken the time to teach your dog that this is something normal and you're coming back. You might not have arranged for your dog to have a dog walker during the day to help prevent accidents. You might be expecting too much from a young dog or a rescue dog that may have had some trauma or PTSD.

Separation anxiety is something that can be overcome. It isn't a reason to relinquish your responsibility to your pack member. Remember, you're a family, and if your family member is having difficulty, you must help them.

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