

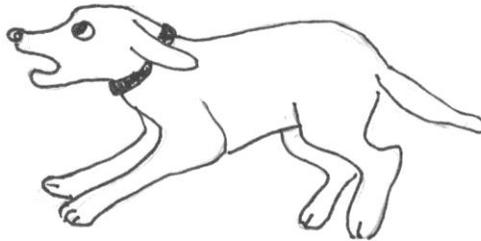
Defensive Aggression

What is the behavior?

Defensive aggression may be growling, snapping or biting when a dog is confronted with what he views as a threat and he is unable to avoid or escape the perceived danger. It is based in a fear which may or may not be reasonable. A machete-wielding masked man rapidly approaching may be a reasonable fear; a child riding past on a bike is not. It is the dog's **perception of the threat** that is important.

The defensively aggressive dog may exhibit a mixture of fearful and offensive postures. He will often go through several behaviors to tell another dog or person he wants to avoid a conflict.

Growl → Snarl → Air Snap → Snap at Clothing → Snap at Skin & Move Away → Bite → Bite HARD!



One challenge is that most people do not know how to read dog body language. (Please review our handout on **Reading Dog Body Language**.) Although most dogs generally do not like to bite, the defensively aggressive dog, when pushed to his limit, will choose to go on the offensive.

What is the severity of the behavior?

Series of behaviors preceding aggression:

If your defensively aggressive dog is placed in a stressful situation, he will likely go through a fairly predictable series of behaviors:

- **Anxiety** – Signs of anxiety include yawning, stretching, whining, looking in many directions, drooling.
- **Avoidance** - Your dog may avoid eye contact and look everywhere else but the person/thing he considers a threat. Often he will look at the threat with a side glance at first and immediately move away.
- **Escape** - If given the opportunity, he will avoid conflict and look for an escape route. If he cannot escape, his “fight or flight” response will kick in. If your dog cannot flee a stressful situation, he will likely aggress.
- **Freeze** – Immediately prior to advancing to aggressive mode, your dog will likely freeze. His body will be stiff; hackles may be up, his weight forward, eyes hard and staring.

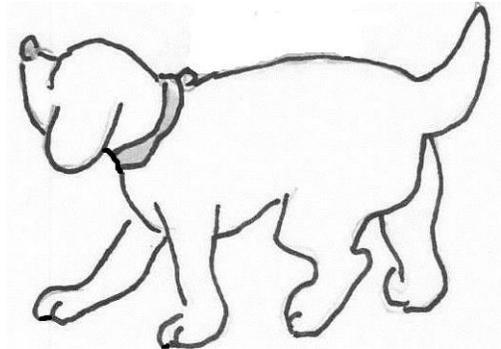
It's best to address the fear in **Anxiety** and **Avoidance** (above) by moving away from the perceived threat or lessening its intensity. For a dog not used to handling, for example, shorter sessions are best. For a dog who actively avoids other dogs or strangers, allowing that space is wise. It's best to allow a dog who is showing fearful behaviors enough time to approach you rather than forcing an interaction.

How do you modify the behavior?

Understand the Triggers:

Eye contact: Most humans are comfortable making direct eye contact with another human. In fact, we are uncomfortable with people who avoid eye contact. Most dogs are comfortable making direct eye contact with the people in their family, and often, your dog may seek out this eye contact.

However, dogs are generally uncomfortable with strangers making direct eye contact. Many dogs consider such staring a threat or a challenge. If your dog feels threatened, he may turn his head away and back up. Sometimes he will growl while backing up. If he feels additionally challenged, or lacks the space to get away, he may move towards the human and bark or growl, then immediately back away. These displays are a way for a scared dog to create space from what he considers a threat.



Hugging and petting: Another human behavior dogs barely tolerate, but which humans assume they like, is hugging and petting. Some dogs will learn to tolerate petting on the head, but it's off putting to them. Some dogs will avoid petting by ducking away from hands. Hugging is an even more threatening behavior to dogs. Some dogs can panic if they are restrained. Children love to hug dogs and that can cause conflicts.

Reaching toward a dog to greet him: Humans have been taught for generations to hold out their hand to an unknown dog so he can "sniff" it before greeting. For a dog who is wary or fearful of strangers, this is clearly a threat.

The approach of an unknown dog: For the dog who has not been socialized to other dogs or - for whatever reason - fears other dogs, the approach of an unknown dog can be extremely threatening.

Management:

Prevent situations that provoke the defensive behavior. Plan your outings with your dog's needs in mind and be attentive to the environment while you are together. The more your dog engages in a particular behavior, the better he gets at it. Since the behavior is repeatedly rehearsed, it becomes more ingrained.

Rule out medical issues with a vet visit. A dog who is not feeling well may, for example, fear that another dog's approach may exacerbate his injury/illness.

Reduce general anxiety. Since a fearful dog may improve if he is less anxious, talk with your trainer and your vet about anti-anxiety medications or homeopathic calming aids. (Please review our **Bach Flower Essences** handout.)

Training:

Counterconditioning: Utilize techniques of counter conditioning to help your dog associate what he fears with something pleasant. (Please review our **Counterconditioning** handout.)

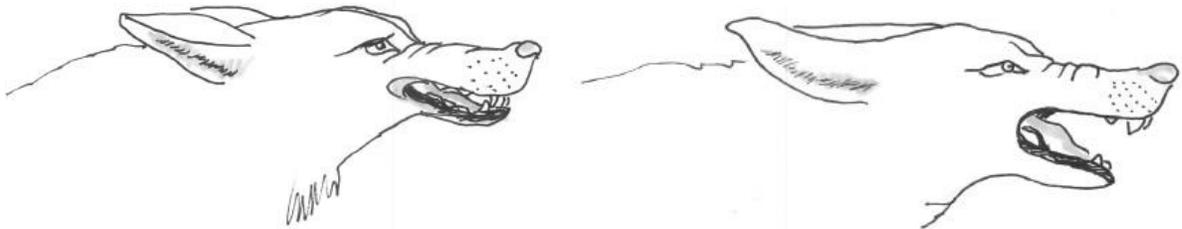
Build Confidence: Train your dog; teach him tricks or a sport like agility or flyball. As a dog learns new skills, his confidence grows, so he is not as fearful overall.

Create physical space: If your dog displays any signs of stress, stop what you are doing, look around and try to create physical space away from the person/thing that is the object of the perceived threat.

Behavior Adjustment Training: Using B.A.T. techniques, teach your dog how to self-soothe and create space for himself. This can be done with the assistance of a qualified trainer. (Please review our **Leash Frustration** handouts.)

Relationship:

Do not punish your dog for growling. A growl is a warning that he is uncomfortable. If a growl is punished, there is a very real possibility he may skip this early warning sign of discomfort and proceed more quickly to aggressing.



Respect your dog's preferences regarding his physical space. Do not hug him or stare into his eyes if he seems not to enjoy it. Do not allow strangers or other dogs to approach your dog. Rather, let your dog make the approach.

Safety Concerns:

If your dog has defensive aggression, you must decide:

- Whether he is too dangerous to work with.
- Whether the behavior can be kept under control by managing the environment.
- Whether you have the ability to modify the behavior.
- Whether you have the time and commitment to do so.

If you believe your dog suffers from defensive aggression, the best course of action is to seek guidance from a competent, licensed, professional trainer (Certified Animal Behaviorist or Certified Professional Dog Trainer) who has experience with behavior issues in general and defensive aggression in particular. Modifying this behavior usually involves dealing with the underlying issue of fear and using counterconditioning and other specialized techniques to help change the association of the fear.



Behavior & Training

415.506.6280

[Available B&T Services](#)

Training Resources:

Marin Humane Society's **Behavior & Training** conducts various training classes. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumaneSociety.org.

Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by the **Marin Humane Society**, visit us at MarinHumaneSociety.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.