



Fear of Strangers

It's not uncommon for dogs to be fearful of strangers and then have their fear evolve into fear aggression. This may happen as a dog matures, if a dog is forced to greet someone when they're giving clear signals that they don't want to, or as a newly adopted dog begins to feel more comfortable and confident in their new surroundings and have bonded with their new family. Fear aggression toward strangers can occur anywhere (inside your home, in your yard, at the vet clinic or groomer, or while on a walk in your neighborhood), and for various reasons (territorial, fear of men, fear of being handled/touched, poor socialization, genetics, or protectiveness of family members). Some dog trainers fondly refer to this as stranger danger. Below are some tips regarding how to work with a dog that is fearful of strangers.

- First and foremost, it's very important that you never force a dog to greet someone when they are displaying the following behavior(s): backing away, tail tucked, ears down and back, licking their lips, eyes are bug-eyed or whale-eyed, panting, looking away, and/or raising a paw. If you force a dog to greet someone while they are confined to a leash or backed into a corner, there is a good chance that your dog will bite out of fear.
- Secondly, if you know your dog has a history of being fear aggressive (which may include the following behavior: lunging, charging, barking aggressively, growling, snarling, air snapping, nipping, or biting), it's very important that your dog remain on leash for everyone's safety.
- For dogs that lunge and bark at people while they are out on a walk, that sort of behavior is referred to leash reactivity and may also include lunging and barking at other things such as dogs, squirrels, cars, etc. It's important to maintain a distance that allows your dog to remain below threshold, meaning you should maintain a distance where your dog may look at another stranger but does not begin to lunge or bark. While maintaining that distance, work on a calm "look" and "sit" (please see the Leash Reactivity handout). If you can get within a distance for a stranger to toss a treat to your dog, have a friend that your dog doesn't know greet you outside on a walk and toss your dog treats. By pairing treats with what your dog is fearful of, a stranger, you will help counter condition your dog to the presence of strangers, effectively teaching them that strangers aren't that scary and are actually a good thing, involving yummy treats. It will also help if your friend that is helping you with your training session can turn sideways to your dog and crouch down or kneel, which is a much less threatening body stance, thus allowing your dog to feel less threatened and that the stranger is more approachable. Talking softly in a higher-pitched voice is also more soothing and calming to a dog than speaking in a loud, low tone.
- For dogs that behave aggressively toward guests that come to the front door, it's very important that there are two adults available to work with your dog during this training scenario: one adult to greet the guests at the door and one adult to stand back at a distance and work with your dog while

he or she is on leash. If there is only one adult available to work on this exercise, it will be important that before you open your front door to greet your guests, you go and put your dog in their crate or in a room where your dog can remain safely. That means that your guests may be waiting at the front door for an extra minute or two, but it is well worth the wait for the safety of your guests. When your guests are in the front door, then go get your dog and put them on a leash. If your dog begins to settle down and you can get a few solid “sit” and “look” exercises in with them, allow your dog to go up and sniff your guests, but instruct your guests not to stare at your dog or attempt to lean over and pet your dog, which can be perceived as very threatening and challenging body language to a dog and may cause your dog to become fearful and bite. Once your dog has sniffed your guests, get more distance between your dog and the guests and then ask your guests to sit in a chair or on the couch. Then allow your dog to approach to sniff and be petted. Again, make sure your guests have treats while they are seated so they can give them to your dog when your dog calmly approaches. Depending on your dog’s body language to your guests, if your dog is starting to loosen up and is enjoying receiving treats from your guests, you can allow your dog to drag its leash so that you can always quickly grab it if you need to regain control of your dog again.

- Desensitizing your dog to the sound of the doorbell or knocking on the door will also decrease their reactivity to those stimuli. You can do this by ringing the doorbell and then, if your dog only barks once or twice and then settles down quickly, give them a treat. They will most likely start out by barking crazily when they first hear the doorbell, so you’ll want to wait your dog out; then, when they are finally quiet and not jumping, give them a treat. Over a few repetitions, you will teach your dog that when they are less reactive to the doorbell, they will get a treat. Just because you do this exercise doesn’t mean your dog will stop barking when someone comes to the door. Many people want their dog to alert them to the presence of a stranger at the front door, but there is a big difference between a dog that barks a few times and a dog that has a full-blown frenzied reaction to someone coming to the front door where you have little to no control of the situation.
- Never allow your dog to greet anyone while they are lunging and barking. You could risk your dog biting someone. Also, by allowing your dog to greet someone by lunging and barking, you will be teaching your dog that that is an appropriate way to greet someone. When your dog begins an inappropriate behavior, try interrupting the behavior and asking for a more suitable behavior, such as “sit” and “look” or “down” and “look.” Be sure to have treats nearby to reward your dog for this more desirable behavior. This approach is commonly referred to as asking for an incompatible behavior. If your dog is unable to focus, you may need to get more distance between you and the person your dog is barking at while outside (please see our handout on Leash Reactivity), or take your dog to another room in your home so that they can cool down and refocus their attention back on you.
- Never hit, yell at, or use other forms of dominance or punishment when working with a fearful or aggressive dog; it will most often make them more fearful or more aggressive. They will pair the aversive experience of being yelled at or hit with the presence of the stranger and, in the future, they will continue to be fearful in the presence of strangers.

If, after trying these suggestions, you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your dog, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.

Written by the Wayside Waifs Animal Behavior Team
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Here is some additional information that will be helpful when working with dogs that have a fear of strangers:

<http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/fear-people>
<http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/canine-body-language>
<http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/desensitization-and-counterconditioning>
<http://info.drSophiaYin.com/Portals/13722/docs/SY18x24GreetPostersm.pdf>
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