



GROWLING AT PEOPLE

Is my dog protecting or defending me?

It far more likely explanation is that a dog is being *defensively aggressive*. They are probably a little cautious around (or even overtly fearful of) strangers. **Escape is usually the first choice** for a fearful dog, but if they are on a leash and can't retreat, they communicate in the only way that they know to tell the scary person to stay away. *Growl. Lunge. Snap. Bite.*

We often see this behavior emerge in dogs during adolescence, as they approach maturity. These concerns begin with dogs who are from eight to 18 months of age. These are usually the dogs who were somewhat shy as a pup. Shy pups tend to *shut down and suffer* the attentions of the people who want to greet or comfort them. As they get a little older, they may respond with a growl instead of just shutting down.

Wise people back off when a dog growls. "Hey!" the dog learns. "That worked; I'm going to try that again!" The growling behavior is *reinforced by success*; the dog realizes that they can get people to leave them alone by growling at them, so they **growl more** when people approach. At some point when an approaching stranger doesn't react quickly enough to growling, the dog escalates to a lunge. That works, too. Lunge, snap, and perhaps even bite are added to the behavioral repertoire.

Do dogs without training ever truly protect their humans? It does happen, but **it's rare**.

Defensive Aggression

Assuming your dog is being defensively aggressive, not really protecting you, what can you do about it?

You can manage their behavior, of course, by keeping your dog safe at home where they are not going to be approached by someone who makes them feel uncomfortable. However, a lot of people adopt dogs because they enjoy taking them for walks. If this is true for you, you can manage by stopping anyone from approaching and trying to pet them, especially when you are walking with your dog on a leash.

You need to be assertive for this to work. By the time you politely say, “Please don’t approach my dog, they’re really not comfortable with strangers,” your dog could have already bitten the advancing dog-lover. Instead, hold your hand up, chest high and palm forward in the universal “stop” signal, and say “Stop!” in a loud, assertive tone. Now you have time to explain why you don’t want them to pet your dog. **Stick to your guns**, even if you get the standard “But dogs love me!” assurance.

Of course, it’s even better if you can convince your dog that they don’t have to be fearful of people they don’t know. Classical counter-conditioning and desensitization is very useful here: Consistently **pair the presence of strangers with very high-value treats** (we use chicken – baked, boiled, or turkey hot dogs, cut into small pea sized bites) while keeping your dog far enough away that they are aware of the stranger’s presence but not overly concerned. Strangers make treats happen!

If your dog won’t take the treats, or if they are growling, barking, or lunging, you are too close!

Let them look, then feed them a treat. Look, treat. Look, treat. When they no longer seem concerned about the person, move slightly closer and repeat the procedure. **Take your time**. If you think you’re going too slow, slow down.

What you don’t want to do is have the scary stranger feed your dog treats from their hand. While this seems like a feasible version of counter-conditioning (strangers make treats happen), it often draws the dog too close to the person (because they really want the treat) and then when the treat is gone, they look up to see the scary stranger right in their face, and wham! The bite happens.

Another thing you **don’t ever** want to do is **punish your dog for their defensive behavior**: no verbal or physical corrections, no squirt bottles, no yanking on the leash, no bean bags. While punishment may stop the behavior in the moment, these aversive methods are very likely to increase your dog’s stress, defensiveness, and aggression in the future when people approach; now they have to worry about what you’re going to do as well as what the stranger may do. Our goal is to have our dogs associate good stuff with strangers, not bad stuff. We want them to feel better about people approaching, not worse!