

## PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING DOGS WITH FEAR/ FEARFUL AGGRESSION

Fear aggression is one of the most commonly diagnosed canine behavioral conditions. Dogs who are fearfully aggressive are often called “fear biters.” Many fearfully aggressive dogs do not bite, but growl or bark aggressively in situations that upset them. Such situations can include approaches from other dogs, approaches from all people, approaches from children, approaches from people or dogs in specific places, interactions involving a certain kind of noise, et cetera.

In some cases, dogs become fearfully aggressive because they have been excessively punished or abused. Puppies who are physically punished for housetraining accidents can become fearfully aggressive.

Some dogs who are fearfully aggressive have not had any bad experiences—they are naturally anxious and fearful. These dogs are not normal, but can respond well to treatment.

Fearfully aggressive dogs generally react inappropriately when they feel intruded upon and worsen if they feel cornered. They do not actually have to be intruded upon or cornered to feel this way. When behavioral diagnoses are involved it is important that we understand the situation **from the dog’s perspective**.

Merely approaching a dog that is fearfully aggressive can be sufficient to intensify his aggressive response. Many dogs continually threaten by barking, growling, or snarling, but do not bite. Such behaviors can be accompanied by postures that include slinking, lowering or tucking of the tail, ears pulled horizontally back, and piloerection (hair standing on end) over the regions of their neck and shoulders, hips, and tail. Some of these dogs will urinate or salivate while exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

If you are good at understanding canine behavior, you will understand that all of these behaviors signal that the dog does not wish to interact. These behaviors are all designed to remove the dog from an active social interaction. Please *do not view these behaviors as “submissive behaviors.” These dogs are not “submitting” to you so that you can do whatever you want with them*. Instead, they are telling you that they are unable to interact calmly and that they feel threatened. This may not seem like a rational response to you, but it doesn’t have to be rational. Such responses are an indicator that the dog needs help. The dog is giving you a lot of information and by understanding these signaling associations, outright aggression can often be avoided.

### Patterns of Biting

Just because a dog has never bitten before does not mean that he will not do so. By definition, each dog who bites had to bite for a “first time.” If you know that a dog has bitten, you actually have a lot of useful information. You know that the dog may feel sufficiently distressed to bite, and you know the circumstances in which this has happened. Hence, you can avoid bites.

Fearfully aggressive dogs often bite from behind, when the interaction is ending. These dogs will often grab someone when the person turns away from the dog. These dogs may not intend to bite: The grab may be intended to stop the

human from changing behavior and doing something that the dog thinks is worrying. After these dogs have bitten, they often back up immediately. Remember that fearfully aggressive dogs try to avoid interactions, so in this context the backing up makes sense.

**Please do not think that this pattern of behavior guarantees that fearfully aggressive dogs will *not* bite from the front:** Biting from the front is their only recourse if they are cornered. Such dogs will *feel* cornered if they have no other means of escape. Situations that can make fearfully aggressive dogs feel cornered include when the dog is crated, when he is under a table, when he is in a corner, and when he is under a blanket.

Remember that aggressions are anxiety disorders and any time the dog has less control over his behavior or cannot monitor everyone else’s behaviors, he will become more fearful and reactive.

### The Role of Small Children

There is a special class of fearful aggression that can develop in households with small children. This type of fearful aggression is usually directed toward children who are 2 to 5 years of age. Because these children are very active, they may fall on the dog when playing and unintentionally hurt the dog. Older or ill dogs may be particularly at risk from young children because older dogs do not move quickly and may have physical ailments like arthritis or chronic/periodic ear infections that are painful if someone grabs them or falls on them. If the dog begins to associate pain or discomfort with the presence of the child, and the child continues to pursue interaction with the dog, the dog may act aggressively out of fear of being hurt again. In the case of the dog with periodic ear infections, you may think that the dog has always acted appropriately in the past, and so may not understand why the dog “suddenly” snapped at the child until you realize that the dog’s ears are, again, severely infected.

Children of all ages should be taught age-specific appropriate behaviors for interacting with pets. No child should be allowed to tug on any animal’s ears or tails. Children should learn to play with all animals using toys—not their body parts. Children should learn to respect that pets are another species and that because of that they may not always understand that the child did not mean to hurt them. Children should learn to respect that animals have teeth and claws and can use those to defend themselves. Until the parent is positive that both the dog and the child are safe together they should not be left alone, unsupervised. **No exceptions.** For help with teaching your child safe, appropriate and fun ways to interact with dogs see *The Blue Dog*. The Blue Dog video is a product of the Blue Dog Trust ([www.thebluedog.org](http://www.thebluedog.org)). In the United States, it is available from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) for a nominal charge ([www.avma.org/bluedog](http://www.avma.org/bluedog)). The DVD is accompanied by an excellent booklet for caregivers and a website with supporting materials for parents, teachers, and other groups is being developed.

## Treatment

The treatment of fear/fearful aggression involves treating both the fear and the aggression.

Because these dogs are already fearful, it is important that nothing in the course of treatment worsen this fear. These dogs **are not the same** as those that are just fearful without being aggressive. Dogs that are fearfully aggressive are potentially dangerous to the animals or people in whose presence they exhibit this response and must be treated with appropriate respect and caution.

The following tick list covers the steps necessary to help fearfully aggressive dogs learn to be both less fearful and less aggressive.

## Tick List

1. Do not reach toward the dog, especially if the dog is cornered or if there is no way that she can escape from or avoid you (e.g., when she is under a table or in a crate). Instead, call the dog to you and ask her to sit and relax. When the dog relaxes, give her a treat. If you need help with teaching sitting or relaxing see the **Protocol for Deference** and the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**.
2. Do not disturb the dog when she is resting. This could startle and frighten her. Instead, call the dog to you and ask her to sit and relax. When the dog relaxes, give her praise and a treat.
3. *Never* physically “correct” or punish the dog. Physical correction scares these dogs and will make them worse. Furthermore, punishment teaches them that their aggressive response is the correct one because it was met with aggression, and it teaches the dog that you are a threat. This is not what you want.
4. Consider using a snugly fitting head collar that will allow you to close the dog’s mouth, if needed. Once the dog is fitted with this, the head collar can also be used indoors, when the dog is supervised. With a head collar you have the option of stopping any snapping or biting by closing the dog’s mouth (rendering the dog safer) and then taking her safely from the room, away from the inciting event. Remember to reward your dog when she is calm. If your dog does not calm, ignore her.
5. Try to avoid any and all situations in which your dog may react aggressively.
6. Do not tell your dog it is “okay” when she becomes aggressive. It is *not* okay, either for you or her, and she knows it. You may be trying to reassure the dog, which is understandable, but you are only reinforcing the inappropriate behavior and, or confusing her by using a signal that is associated with feeling of calm or happiness that is impossible for the dog at this moment in time.
7. Please warn your friends and neighbors that any dog who is aggressive can be potentially dangerous. Please ask them to cooperate with you and avoid situations that may distress your dog. Emphasize to your friends and anyone who meets your dog that you need for them to listen to you *so that they can help the dog get better*. These requests may be as simple as not reaching toward the dog to pet her. When your friends come to visit, please consider placing your dog in another room, behind a locked door (see the **Protocol for Handling “Special-Needs Pets” During Holidays and Other Special Occasions**). Once everyone has settled down, your dog may be introduced to the people **if and only if**:
  - The dog has been quiet in the area in which she was placed.
  - The dog appears to have a happy interest in coming out of that area.
  - The dog can be introduced on a head collar.
  - The dog successfully sits and waits at your request (see **Protocol for Deference: Basic Program**).
  - Your friends agree to let your dog approach them and then to request that she sit and relax for a verbal request, and they agree that they will not reach for and startle the dog. You must have reliable, trustworthy friends who will listen to you for this plan to work.

If the dog and the visitors can do all of these things, the visitors can reward the dog with small treats. This will also help your dog to learn not to react in such situations.
8. Minimize or avoid sudden movements or loud noises.
9. When your dog approaches any visitor—canine or human—she should be asked to sit, breathe, and relax. Humans should be requested not to stare at your dog, especially if they do so silently. Such stares can be interpreted as threats. It is okay to talk to your dog and look around the room or location normally, if the dog is calm. Take your cues from the dog.
10. If small children are involved, interaction with your dog should be allowed **only** when supervised. The dog should **always** be on a head collar and the children should practice asking your dog to sit before giving her attention. If the small children are visitors, your dog should be placed in another room behind a **locked door** (install a hook-and-eye at the very top where kids cannot reach) prior to the arrival of the small guests. This will:
  - protect the children,
  - save the dog from being placed in the situation of potentially making a mistake that could cost your dog her life, and
  - save the dog much anxiety.

The dog should always have a “safe” room or area that is away from the situations (i.e., children) that are associated with her fearful aggression. This area should be comfortable and should **not** be used as punishment. Remember that the humane interests of the dog should always come first.
11. If the problem involves individuals in your home or situations that occur in the house, please put a bell around the dog’s neck so that you know where she is (Bear Bells: [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com)). This will allow you to monitor the dog’s movements and to either avoid or correct any inappropriate behaviors.
12. Get a “Dog on Premises” sign, or make a sign that announces that there is a dog living on the property. This is not an admission of a dangerous dog, but it is a civically responsible reminder that a dog is on the property. Anyone who has a dog should have such a sign.
13. After you have completed **Protocol for Deference: Basic Program** and **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior**



All three of these "Dog on Premises" signs are on the same driveway gate. Anyone should have the expectation that at least one dog lives on the property.

**Modification Program Tier 1**, you will begin **Tier 2**, which will focus on desensitizing the dog to the situations in which she reacts.

As with other conditions, many of the dogs with fear aggression can benefit from antianxiety medication. Antianxiety medication is not a substitute for the use of treatment

with behavior modification, but medications augment such treatment and may speed the rate at which dogs learn new behaviors. For dogs who experience fear aggression in the absence of any abuse, medication may be an especially humane choice because the dog may never have been neurochemically normal.