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Owners of dogs with dangerous behaviors know that their dogs are not aggressive 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In fact, most of the time, these dogs are wonderful, well-loved members of the family. This makes it very difficult to identify a dog's behavior as "aggressive" and is the behavior sometimes seen as a fluke or having appeared "out of the blue."

Owners will sometimes spend thousands of dollars seeking a "fix" for their dog's behavior and there are many trainers who don't hesitate to promise a magic solution for the right price.

In reality, however, aggressive behavior is not something that can be taken aside, fixed, and put away where it will pose no further problems. After all, aggression is normal dog behavior.

As Karen Overall, DVM, states in her article *Ten Myths in Dealing With Aggressive Behavior*,

"...aggression is a response to the dog's underlying uncertainty or anxiety in these situations."

The behavior is part of who the dog is or, more accurately, how the dog reacts to certain situations.



FIGURING OUT WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR DOG'S AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IS AN IMPORTANT STEP FOR SUCCESSFUL BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

This does not mean, however, that the situation is hopeless. Even genetic or habitual behaviors can be changed and sometimes eradicated through careful behavior modification and management. But in order to successfully modify your dog's behavior, you must first understand

what triggers your dog's behavior and be clear about your own expectations.

### SELF-EVALUATION

Before beginning any behavior modification program with your dog, you must first take a realistic look at your own expectations, goals and deal-breakers. Some questions to ask yourself include:

**Are your expectations realistic and fair to your dog?** If you are expecting your reactive dog to someday enjoy the dog park and become a therapy dog, you may be setting yourself up for disappointment. Remember, your dog's behavior is his instinctive reaction to

# BEHAVIOR

stressful situations. That reaction can be modified, but not erased.

**Will you be able to commit the time and effort to safely manage your dog's behavior?** Is your family also willing to make that commitment? Behavior modification requires time and effort from all members of the family to be effective. Depending on the severity of the behavior, management can lead to a very restrictive lifestyle. Is everyone in your household equally committed to the task?

**Are you willing to live with managing that behavior for the rest of your dog's life?** If your dog is young, you may have 10-15 years of living a restricted lifestyle, including limitations on travel, the ability to adopt other pets, and living situations (roommates, etc.) Living such a lifestyle is not impossible, but does make life more difficult at times.

**What are the deal breakers?** What would cause you to terminate the relationship with your dog? None of us want to think that things might get so bad that we can no longer live with our dog. However, setting this boundary early on will help you clarify what you can live with, and what you cannot.

For most people, this self-analysis is the most difficult aspect of behavior modification. But it is also the most important. Having a clear understanding of your expectations and limitations will ensure you and your dog are successful in reaching your goals.

## OBSERVATION

The next step is observing your dog. Do you know what your dog looks like when he is nervous or scared? For more information on "reading" your

dog's body language, read "Out of the Blue" and other articles on the 4Paws website.

## Aggression is a response to the dog's underlying uncertainty or anxiety in these situations

Instead of looking at your dog's behavior as something that appears from nowhere, like the canine manifestation of Mr. Hyde, look at the environment and events leading up to your dog's exhibition of aggressive behavior.

Once you determine which situations cause your dog to react, you've won half the battle. You can now either avoid these situations for the rest of your dog's life (not the most practical solution), or you can work with a qualified trainer to address your dog's behavior in these situations.

## CONCLUSION

For some dogs, all owners can hope for is safe management. Other dogs may

be able to overcome their response to certain situations through classical and counter-conditioning techniques. Factors such as genetics, early socialization and fair and consistent training play a huge factor in your dog's ability to overcome his or her own behavior.

I lived with a 99% dog for almost 10 years. I searched desperately for a "cure" for his behavior and was always disappointed. I even considered trying the Dog Psychic! One of the most difficult aspects of living with Mac was not knowing when he would react aggressively.

Once I realized that Mac's aggression was not like a mole that could be removed, but rather his response to certain triggers, I was able to recognize those triggers and manage his behavior more effectively. He never did visit a dog park, but that wasn't a realistic goal for him – his lack of early socialization permanently affected how he reacted to new dogs. But, we were still able to enjoy long walks and hikes, trips to the coast and lots of quality time hanging out on the couch. 99% of the time, Mac was a great dog. The other 1% I learned how to manage and live with safely and happily.

-Lisa Mullinax



## FEISTY FIDO IN-HOME TRAINING

This three-session in-home program is designed to give owners the tools they need to safely manage and modify their dog's aggressive behavior.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please go to [www.4PawsU.com](http://www.4PawsU.com).