



Stranger Danger

Why is my dog afraid of strangers?

Many dogs are fearful around people they don't know well. Some people assume these dogs have been abused in the past. Usually, this is NOT the case. Most of the time, if a dog fears a stranger, they have simply not been exposed to them during critical socialization periods, making sure that all new experiences are good ones. If a dog is 16 weeks or older and hasn't had exposure to a variety of people (ages, sizes, genders, etc.) as they mature, they may start to display signs of fearfulness toward strangers.

How can I tell when my dog's scared or fearful?

Say you're a dog who's afraid of strangers and you encounter one. You'll probably want to increase the distance between you and the stranger to relieve your fear and stress. You have two options: go away yourself OR make the stranger go away, your choice you make will depend on many things, like whether fleeing is an option your genetic programming and your previous learning experiences. Dogs try to increase the distance between the people or things that frighten them, you may notice one or more of them when your dog encounters a person she doesn't know. Keep an eye out for the following:

Plan A: Dog tries to go away:

- attempting to flee and/or hide behind/under known people or objects.

Plan B: Dog tries to make the stranger go away:

"I'm nervous please don't approach or touch me right now."

- cowering, shaking or rolling over (showing their belly)
- becoming very still or shutting down (refusing to move frequently shaking)

"I'm extremely afraid of you! Don't come any closer! I mean it!"

- growling/barking and/or showing teeth
- lunging, snapping and/or biting (these often occur if a dog feels trapped)

All the above behaviors indicate extreme stress, and if you notice any of them when you and your dog are around strangers, immediately and calmly remove your dog from the situation. Sometimes canine body language can be hard to interpret, so watch your dog very closely whenever strangers are around to avoid unexpected reactions.

Management

Avoid putting your dog in situations that make her feel threatened. If strangers visit your home, you can give your dog something to chew on and put them into a quiet crate or safe room. If you're going somewhere and you know that you'll see strangers there, leave your dog at home. When out and about with your dog, you will need to watch her very closely in all situations where she may encounter people they don't know. ALWAYS keep their leash under control. If you run into strangers unexpectedly, stay calm. Use treats and a gentle voice and lead your dog away from the area. DON'T let strangers approach your dog if they show any signs of stress (see part A / B). A simple phrase to share with people is when attempting to pet your dog, is "sorry my dog is in training" this normally works, and people will back down. If you decide to allow someone to pet your dog (make sure the location is quiet) instead of allowing strangers to approach the dog Instead, let YOUR DOG approach THEM, I like to use the command "check it out" with a hand gesture towards the person.



Behavior Modification

First and foremost, avoid punishing or yelling at your dog if she barks, growls or tries to run away from strangers. The proper way to address your dog's fearful behavior around strangers involves the use of a desensitization and counterconditioning program. A good training plan involves letting your dog see strangers at a distance—the distance at which your dog is not at all nervous or frightened (**DISTANCE IS YOUR FRIEND WITH FEARFUL DOGS**). Right after the strangers appear, start doling out extremely tasty treats (i.e., Hot dogs, steak, cheese, lunch meats, etc.). When they disappear, the goodies stop coming. With repetition, you can help your dog learn that people she doesn't know aren't as scary as she thought. They're far enough away to make her comfortable, and they always predict delicious goodies! Gradually, you can decrease the distance between your dog and the strangers, and the number of goodies you are dispensing. If at any time your dog shows stress signs (part A/B) you've gone too fast, Increase the distance and try again.

How do I introduce my dog to new people?

If your dog is extremely afraid of strangers or barks/growls/lunges when she sees them, you'll probably need to do some training (always consult a professional with questions) before actually introducing them to new people or avoid introducing them to new people altogether. If your dog just seems a little shy around strangers and you feel she may be ready to meet a new friend, you'll need to proceed with patience and caution. Here are some important tips:

- It's a good idea to spend some time with your dog and her "new friend" in a room. Just hang out and talk for a while and instruct the new person to ignore your dog. That way, she can get used to the new person's presence.
- Always let your dog approach someone she doesn't know on her own, rather than the other way around. If she doesn't approach the new person in a friendly, relaxed manner, she's not ready to interact.
- Advise the new person to act as you did when you first getting to know your dog. Ask him or her to use a soft, calm voice and keep body movements slow and gentle.
- Ask the new person to avoid doing things that your dog may naturally find threatening, like hugging them, looming over them (squatting or sitting may be a good idea), reaching over her head to pet
- After your dog has become more comfortable with her new friend (she decides to approach on her own, stays near the new person, and solicits petting and attention), give him or her some tasty treats to offer your dog.
- NEVER force your dog to meet someone if she doesn't want to. If she tries to retreat, let her do so.
- Use the command "check it out" allowing them to approach the fearful person/stimuli with a slight hand gesture, if the dog at any time shows fearful body language step away and proceed with the counter conditioning desensitization protocol (with fearful dogs its all about staying calm and taking it slow)
- If you at any time fell overwhelmed its never bad to take a step back and consult a certified professional or trainer for assistance.