



FOSTER DOGS & STRANGER/DOG AGGRESSION

What is making him growl at strangers?

You have just picked up a dog from the pound or he's been surrendered to your rescue group. The dog seems fine with you but is growling at everyone else in the family. You invited your parents over to see the dog and he growled at them. A fearful dog that is reluctant to trust strangers will often nip people on the back of their legs as they leave a room or bark and lunge at them while on lead. You took him for a walk and he growled at your friends and their dogs in the park. He has also growled at some children playing nearby. Why is he doing this? Shouldn't he be grateful I rescued him?

It's all new and uncomfortable

The dog is in a new environment, and he doesn't know where to go to the toilet. He doesn't know where he'll be sleeping. He doesn't know when or where he'll be fed next. Most of all he doesn't know you, your family or anyone else. Nothing is familiar to him.

The dog is fearful that he could potentially be put in a life threatening position at any moment. You know he probably won't be, but he doesn't know that, so he needs to be vigilant. Strangers entering the house, who bring unfamiliar scents, sounds and sights also bring unpredictability and exacerbate any instability the dog may feel. You took him for a walk to an unfamiliar area, strange dogs and scents and he doesn't know you either. You might be going to dump him there.

Many dogs are insecure or fearful due to a lack of early socialisation in the first 16 weeks of their life. They may not have had exposure to many experiences we take for granted, or have met many different people in their life.

Putting it into perspective

Think about when you start a new job, you don't know many people's names, let alone their families and hobbies. You make sure you start on time, you keep your work area tidy and listen to what your boss says. You don't make a lot of noise, you keep quiet and maybe smile and make quick eye contact with some of your new colleagues. As a few weeks go by you start to recognise people and know their names. You're able to ask how they are and exchange some pleasantries with them. You're still not talking much but you are starting to know what your job is and becoming a bit more relaxed. Let's move on three months. Now you know your work colleagues a lot better, you can initiate talking with them, you may even know their spouse's name and their children's name, you can ask them about their weekend

activities. You are much more relaxed with your work as you have become familiar with it. You are settled in and feeling quite comfortable.

You probably won't bite anyone in those first few weeks, but you will probably feel anxious to some degree. While you may not show it at work, this anxiety may leak out at home in

various ways, such as you may have difficulty sleeping, you might be short with loved ones or you find concentrating on simple tasks difficult. You may even feel extremely tired all the time or have an increased need to urinate or develop diarrhea. This is anxiety at work, the distress or uneasiness of mind caused by the fear of anticipated real or imagined danger, uncertainty or misfortune. It can happen to dogs too.

The theory

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943 and he used it to describe patterns for which human motivation moves through. The theory is based on two groupings: deficiency needs and growth needs. The first four levels are:

- 1) Physiological: hunger, thirst, bodily comforts, etc.;
- 2) Safety/security: out of danger;
- 3) Belongingness and Love: affiliate with others, be accepted; and
- 4) Esteem: to achieve, be competent, gain approval and recognition.

What does this have to do with dogs and aggression?

When a dog is displaced from a familiar territory, be it neglected, rehomed or a dog that has been impounded in a pound or shelter for a while, all it is initially interested in is its physiological needs being met, that is, where is the food coming from, where can I sleep safely etc. Once these very basic needs have been met according to the dog's point of view, not the carer's or owner's, it will move up the hierarchy and then on to developing a relationship with others. For some dogs this happens fairly rapidly, for others it can weeks or even months before they begin to trust humans.

As the dog develops a relationship, and is safe, fed and has shelter, only then will you start to see learning, such as can be provided by training start to happen. Play only happens when all other levels of the hierarchy are fulfilled. This is why some dogs may be slow to play when going into a foster home.

Dogs that continue to show aggression after several weeks in care usually have underlying anxiety, which is inhibiting their learning. For some dogs the use of Dog Appeasing Pheromones (DAP) in a spray or collar can help reduce some of that anxiety. For those that continue to display anxiety, a consult with a vet is advised to discuss any physiological and psychological reasons for the behaviour, with a view to the possible use of medication to assist in reducing anxiety. Medication alone will not solve the issue so a training program should also be followed when the dog is on medication.

So if your foster or newly adopted dog is showing signs of aggression to members of the family or strangers in the home or on the street, it is best to contact a trainer who has experience working with dogs in this situation, who will evaluate and develop a training plan for you and your dog. Look for a trainer who will be respectful to your dog, understanding the dog's needs and choices and with whom you and your dog will feel safe.

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<http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/conation/maslow.html>