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The respected WA dog behaviour consultant helps us understand our canine companions

## Humans may greet each other with a warm hug or kiss, but don't be under the mistaken notion that dogs also welcome these gestures

**H**UMANS and dogs don't share the same language, so dog owners need to look for and learn their pet's signs of stress. They should be vigilant and notice when their dog is out of its comfort zone. This way potential bad behaviour can be avoided.

Some dogs are reserved with unfamiliar people. Their emotional state requires more understanding. Failure to be aware and to act proactively can inadvertently result in a dog that becomes increasingly fearful. This can sometimes transcend fear and become aggression.

Humans typically greet each other with a warm handshake, a hug or a kiss. We feel, often mistakenly, that all dogs welcome these gestures as a sign of affection. This is not always the case.

Like their human counterparts, some dogs are more social than others. Social animals tolerate the overt approach. But the same cannot be said for those that are more "people-shy". They can interpret our greetings as confrontational and intimidating.

It can place the dog in an uncomfortable predicament and they are likely to resort to either active or passive defensive behaviour to escape the unwanted attention.

Some people believe the myth that the best way for people-shy dogs to overcome their fear is physical contact – to pat them and demonstrate friendliness. However, this, more than likely, will exacerbate the problem.

The dog doesn't necessarily view this approach as friendly. Indeed, extending the hand, with smiling teeth flashing, eyes that are wide open, and a voice reminiscent of "goo-goo-ga-ga" baby talk could alarm the dog.

In any event they are "rude gestures" to engage the dog and all the more reason for it to harden its conviction that unfamiliar people are a cause for concern.

It certainly doesn't help improve the dog's views of other people. Any dog can bite and cause damage. Most dogs have a limit to what they will tolerate at any given time.

### Here are some smart steps to take when interacting with fearful dogs:

#### BE ASSERTIVE

It's worth being firm when unfamiliar people are in your dog's company. It can take a lot of convincing to deter some people from interacting with a dog they know little or nothing about. Those who insist on approaching dogs and attempting to touch them, despite repeated requests to the contrary, bear some responsibility if they get bitten.

#### LEAVE THE DOG ALONE

Ask people not to make eye contact, to avoid facing the dog and to restrain from physical or verbal interaction. This aloofness is often enough for the shy dog to build up the courage to approach and investigate the "scary" person. Dogs learn people are safe by having positive associations in their company. Once this is achieved, it can set the stage for happy times.

#### VISITORS AND STRANGERS EQUAL HAPPY TIMES

One of the best ways to promote a good relationship with people your dog perceives as scary is to make their meeting a rewarding situation. The best-of-the-best food rewards should be offered at the beginning of the interaction, continued for a while, and then ended when the person leaves. This makes the dog feel better about the presence of scary folk. It associates fine dining and a good time with the visitor, who, along with the owners, could also offer treats.

#### WHAT TO DO IF YOUR DOG GROWLS

A growl is a form of communication in the shape of a warning. By punishing the warning, and not addressing the underlying cause, you're ignoring early signs that your dog isn't comfortable. Interrupt your dog by saying its name to get its attention, have it settle down, then review what just transpired. Calmly prevent the dog from reacting towards the person. The growl is a message; learn from it and become a better observer.

#### MANAGE YOUR DOG'S BEHAVIOUR

Reactivity levels vary in fearful dogs. Some may need to be kept on a lead while others are quite safe off lead. If you know your dog has a tendency to rush at unknown people and you're not confident of keeping situations safe, use a lead for safety. Ensure your dog is rewarded for good behaviour while under restraint. It makes lead-time more comfortable.

Dogs, like people, learn at their own pace, so it's important not to rush the process. There are many factors that contribute to your dog's behaviour. These include genetic predisposition, lack of early socialisation, their experiences to date, environmental factors and training opportunities (or lack thereof).

Keep your dog and others safe. Don't be in a rush for a dog to get over its fear. Canine confidence can improve by using the tips above. But it will occur in the dog's own time.

\* Visit [www.kathydogtraining.com.au](http://www.kathydogtraining.com.au) to find out when Kathy's next Intensive Dog Behaviour Workshops will be held.



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