

Aggressive Shepherd Dog

Dogs can be protective, but they should never be aggressive.

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Q. I have a question regarding my 2-year-old German Shepherd Dog. She has always been very anxious and fearful of people, even though when she was a very young puppy my husband brought her everywhere with him. She was brought up in social situations where people loved to pet her even though she always shied away and tried to hide.

I've tried different training techniques. When we are out walking or in the park, she sits as people pass by while I feed her tidbits and praise her good behavior. However, if someone comes too close for comfort she still growls and barks in a low tone. Also, there's a huge problem if anyone comes into our home. She barks and growls in a vicious manner; she even snapped at someone about a year ago. It has led us to muzzle her when any visitor comes over, and all during the visits I feel anxious and worried. I have tried natural calming treats and tablets, but it seems we make little or no progress calming her when visitors are over (whether it be one or two people).

We also have a 9-½-year-old Maltese who barks, but only to get people to pet her. Both are just big sweethearts when we're home alone. Any suggestions as to what to do to calm and train our girl to not be aggressive toward people?

A. You have the makings of a serious problem-one that could threaten the life of your shepherd, the health of a visitor, and your homeowners insurance or bank account if it continues unchecked.

I would immediately recommend investing in professional personal training or behavioral counseling for your dog. Since she seems to be fine at home when no one else outside your family is around, it sounds as if she needs to learn some cues from you as to when to ignore visitors.

Remember, it is her job in life to protect you and your family from any strangers that enter your home. The two main methods a professional trainer or dog behaviorist will use are counter conditioning and desensitization. With counter conditioning, your dog will be offered rewards every time someone new visits and she does not act aggressively. This should be done with staged visits from your friends. Eventually, the rewards will decrease as she comes to realize that visits from strangers are not threatening. At some point, you can have your staged visitors give your shepherd a treat.