

Chaos at the Door

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During our in-home consultations with our clients, we observe that many owners have problems with their dogs when people come to the door. These problems can range from dogs who are just overly friendly and demand attention by jumping on people; to those that are threatening or aggressive when someone unfamiliar enters their territory. Other dogs see this as a chance to dash out the door and enjoy a brief run through the neighborhood.

The first step in changing these behaviors is to not add to them by becoming overly excited yourself and yelling or grabbing at your dog. This only adds to the tension and arousal level of the situation, and makes it more likely your dog will continue to be out of control. Instead of focusing on disciplining your dog for undesirable behavior, it is much more effective to concentrate on teaching her what you want her to do instead. For example, rather than yelling “off” if your dog jumps on people, instead, tell her to sit. This may be more successfully accomplished by using a special tidbit to lure her into position initially. When you know visitors will be arriving, place a few tidbits right outside the front door so the visitor can also deliver the treat when your dog responds to their requests to ‘sit’. If the dog jumps instead, everyone should turn and walk away from her. She is jumping because she wants attention, and this technique quickly teaches her that the only way she can get it is to keep her paws off of people. As soon as all four feet are on the floor, she can be petted.

When dogs threaten visitors by barking or growling, they must be conditioned to think that visitors mean ‘good things’. Visitors can be asked to assume non-threatening behaviors – avoid eye contact with the dog, don’t face him, don’t lean over him or reach out toward him. Instead, they should be instructed to drop a number of small tidbits on the floor for the dog. They should continue to ignore the dog until he stops barking and displays calmer behaviors – perhaps being willing to sit for a treat that is offered from an open palm. If there is any concern the dog may bite, he should be muzzled during these greetings. Most threatening dogs however, are much better if visitors ignore them initially rather than attempt to interact with them.

It can also be helpful to habituate your dog to the sound of the doorbell. This is done by ringing the bell frequently, but no visitors arrive. This helps to break the association in the dog’s mind that bell means visitors. When the dog is less reactive to the sound of the bell, it is usually easier to teach him alternative behaviors, such as staying in designated location when the doorbell rings rather than rushing to the door. While chaos at the door can be managed by putting the dog outside or in another room when the bell rings, this approach never teaches him how to be better when visitors arrive.