

Game Changers for dogs with “Stranger Danger:”

Many dogs feel uncomfortable with people they don’t know. This discomfort can manifest in many ways, and not all of them are what you’d expect! However, we as dog guardians have lots of options at our disposal to help dogs feel more comfortable around strangers, and advocate for them while they’re still learning to trust.

PART 1: ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

1. Can you tell if your dog is uncomfortable?

Body language is always the place to start! Many signals of stress and fear are obvious, but there are often more subtle signals that can be missed:

Overt signs of discomfort

Cowering/shaking
Growling/showing teeth
Exposing belly
Tucked tail
Barking/lunging
Hiding/running away
Snapping

Subtle signs of discomfort

Lip licking (tongue flicks out over nose)
Whale eye (whites showing)
Paw lift
Leaning away/moving away
Ears back
Closed mouth
Stiff body, won’t disengage or take food

We want to pay AS MUCH attention to “inside voice” body language as we do to more intense signals. If we respect the “whisper,” our dogs won’t have to “yell.”

2. Consider your environment

It’s important to consider under what circumstances your dog feels most comfortable. Where do they show their most relaxed selves? At home? In their yard? In the car? On a walk? With certain people? Think about what YOUR dog’s comfort zone looks like—you know them best!

3. Are there places in your routine that push them PAST their comfort zone?

Are they regularly in scenarios where you can tell they’re uncomfortable? If so, we want to **adjust their routine FIRST**. Before implementing any training, it’s very important to limit how many times they feel scared or threatened during their average day. Every time a dog is pushed “over threshold” this way, a rush of cortisol floods the bloodstream. This can build up over time, leading to chronic stress which will impede training!

4. Look for alternatives

Once you identify places in your dog’s routine that they feel uncomfortable, look for replacements that can meet their needs without the risk of pushing them over threshold.

- Dog park → unused tennis court
- Busy street → nearby quiet park
- Off-leash dog beach → regional park with longline leash
- Coffee shop → dog stays at home with an enrichment item
- Scary visitors → dog in another room BEFORE they arrive

Some of these solutions may be temporary. But by finding alternative ways to meet your dog’s needs, you will not only help reduce stress/set your training up for success but will make sure that your dog doesn’t accidentally have the chance to aggress when in a fearful situation.

PART 2: TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

You have many options when it comes to helping a dog feel more comfortable in unfamiliar scenarios or around unfamiliar people. Here are some to consider for various scenarios:

Protected contact. Putting a physical barrier between your dog and something scary can be an important safety precaution. Examples might include:

- Baby gates or exercise pens (in home)
- Visual barriers such as window cling
- A closed door (ex. Between your dog and visitors)
- A sanctuary area (ex. A crate with enrichment inside)
- Muzzle training for potential bite risks (check out www.muzzleupproject.com for a full overview of how to properly train a muzzle!)

Distance increasing signals. Many people assume that they can approach your dog, especially if the dog is extra cute! But it's our job to ADVOCATE on their behalf to help prevent interactions they aren't ready for.

- **Signage for equipment.** A vest, leash attachment, or Velcro patch saying "Do not approach"/ "caution" / "do not pet" can help well-meaning walkers make the right choice
- **Practice "easy out" lines.** In the moment, asking someone not to pet your dog can be awkward! We highly recommend practicing a specific line or phrase in the mirror so that you are comfortable using it when you need it. An example might be:
 - "Can you give us some space? She's not comfortable with new people, thanks for understanding!"

When you can't ask for distance, MAKE distance! If life happens and your dog is about to go over threshold, help them make the choice to move away from the scary thing. Fight or flight is real and moving away is always better than aggressing! Want to learn how to train this behavior? **Check out our "Emergency U-Turn" handout!**

Make use of neutral spaces. Worried dogs tend to be most uncomfortable when strangers enter what they consider a "safe zone." However, the dog entering a neutral space *where the stranger is already present* is often much more successful! Examples include meeting a new person outside on a walk before entering the home, or keeping a dog separated and letting them enter only once guests are already settled.

Treat delivery. If you are using treats to help your dog become more comfortable with someone new, first consider the above, THEN go check out our "Treat Retreat" handout. The way we deliver treats to fearful dogs MATTERS and can make or break an interaction!

Contact a professional. Because stranger danger can take so many forms, it can be incredibly helpful to get the assistance of a certified trainer to create an individualized training plan. For a free 15min consult, check out www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp

Finally, keep in mind that your dog is exhibiting these behaviors because they are uncomfortable! While they can be challenging, frustrating, or even embarrassing at times, it's important to remember that **the dog is only acting to protect themselves from something they perceive might harm them.** It's our job to approach those perceptions with compassion, and not flood them with situations they're not ready for.

Instead, we can make sure they feel as comfortable as possible while they learn to navigate new experiences.

