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What To Do About Pet Aggression

When Lassie Turns Sassy

How to handle a gentle pet that suddenly bites and snaps

By [Karen Jones](#)



Just like Frasier and Eddie or Peter Griffin and Brian, 10-year-old Johnnie and his golden retriever, Luke, were inseparable—until one day Luke lunged at the boy and bit him, recalls Steve Dale, a certified animal behavior consultant. When Luke did it again, sending the boy to the ER, doctors alerted authorities.

Fortunately for Luke (and his family), a vet discovered a raging ear infection, and once treated, Luke became his gentle old self again. If your pet ever becomes a threat, here's how to have an equally happy ending:

CHECK WITH YOUR VET

This is rule No. 1 for any suddenly aggressive pet, says Dale, the author of *Good Dog!* and a contributing editor of *Decoding Your Dog*. As evidenced by Luke, a painful physical problem may be at work, so eliminate that first.

CALL IN A TRAINER

Aggression is often fear based, so if there's no culpable health problem, "engage a trainer to help correct the behavior," says KC Theisen of the Humane Society of the United States. Positive reinforcement is the way to go.

"Once we identify why the dog is aggressing, we plan to treat the underlying cause, not just symptoms. We put boundaries in place and redirect negative behavior into positive. We'll say no at times, but we don't shout, hit, or intimidate," says trainer Victoria Stilwell, host of Animal Planet's *It's Me or the Dog*. "If you get angry, you'll just fuel the fire."

On one episode, Stilwell used this strategy with Teddy, a Pomeranian that was "fiercely protective" of his female owner, to the point where he'd bite her husband. Using a calm,

nonconfrontational manner, Stilwell lifted Teddy off the bed or sofa whenever he growled at the husband's approach. "Teddy soon learned that the only way to access what he wanted—the wife—was to accept the husband," Stilwell explains.

READ BODY LANGUAGE

To contain aggression if it arises again, recognize warning signs. Dogs will usually stand motionless and growl with tails down. Cats can be trickier. "Look for cat body language that signifies anxiety or fear. Signs include flattened ears, dilated pupils, and fur standing on end," says Jackson Galaxy, the author of *Catification* and host of Animal Planet's *My Cat from Hell*. "Every cat has a different stimulation threshold. Know who your cat is."

Generally, new aggression "is a sign your pet needs you to behave differently," concludes Theisen. "Most problems are solvable."

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