

# Dog is crazy when the doorbell rings... Ask a trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPACTP

Dear Trainer,

Every time someone comes to our door, our dog flips out. He barks and spins and sometimes even grabs on to my pants if I try to hold him back. My dog is a two year old lab mix that we rescued about a year ago. He was a stray so we don't know much about him, but he has done this since the first day we had him. The weird thing is that he is fine once people come into the house, but it sure scares people that don't know him. I tell him, "No," but he still does it. I really would like him to greet people nicely, and I sure don't want him to take swipes at my pants.

Signed,

*Doorbell Disaster*

Dear Disaster,

First, thank you for rescuing your dog! Second, since you don't really know about this dog's background, it's hard to say why he behaves the way he does at the door. The important thing at this point is to teach your dog what to do when people come to visit. What we do know about any behavior, is if the animal is allowed to continue practicing the behavior, and nothing else is taught in place of the unwanted behavior, there is no reason for the dog to give up doing what he feels is the correct answer in the moment.

Unfortunately, without actually seeing the behavior, it's really hard to say what is going on with your dog and his door greetings. I will do my best to give you some ideas, but it is important that you contact a trainer that uses only positive techniques, and who will come to your home where the problem is happening to sort this out.

## **First, prevent the behavior**

As I already mentioned, one of the most important aspects of behavior modification is the prevention of the unwanted behavior. If your dog continues to "practice" the behavior at the door, and, in addition, gets attention and feedback from you when it happens, (via telling him, "No," and taking his collar) the likelihood of this continuing grows with each incident. So, at least for now, put your dog away until people are brought into the house so he doesn't get so riled up.

## **Watch your language**

Dogs don't understand English, and in fact it is a 2<sup>nd</sup> language to them—not to mention a language with many complexities when you consider that you are asking another species to understand what you want with your words. Many people believe that if they just tell their dog, "No," when the behavior happens, it will stop the dog from doing said behavior. Sorry to say that many dogs are actually reinforced by the human voice, even if you believe you are "disciplining" your dog. In other words, you may actually be "telling" your dog to keep doing what he is doing by the very act of giving it attention with your words and actions. On the other hand, your dog might put two and two together and discover that you get angry with him when the people come over, so it must

be their fault—not the best way to encourage a better relationship between your dog and your guests.

### **What and why**

When I look at a behavior problem, I consider “why” the dog is doing what he is doing, but since we can’t actually ask the dog, I strongly consider “what” the dog is getting from repeating the behavior. Dogs replicate behaviors that result in rewards or some sort of survival advantage. Anytime a dog continues to display unwanted behaviors, there is most certainly a payoff of some sort. The most common benefits for continuing behaviors are attention/affection from humans, having a need met such as in protecting one’s food, warding off danger, stress release such as in barking or chewing, or it’s just plain fun, as in digging. A good behavior or practitioner should be able to define what your dog derives from the behavior, and once you have that piece of information, you will be able to work toward fulfilling that need in a different way.

### **Teach an incompatible behavior**

Your dog won’t be able to bark at people if you teach him something that is incompatible with the current behavior. One of my favorites is to teach dogs that when the doorbell rings, go somewhere else, like outside, in a bedroom or in a crate until things have calmed down.

You could also teach your dog to pick up a ball in his mouth when the doorbell rings if he enjoys playing ball. It would be difficult to bark with a ball in his mouth, and you could have your guests toss it for him when they walk in so your dog begins to associate the doorbell with people coming to play ball with him.

It’s essential that you teach the dog how to do these things without guests present so the new behavior(s) is strong and greatly reinforced before adding the visitors into the picture. Again, a good trainer can help you with this.

### **Be a good leader**

Trust goes both ways. For your dog to trust you, you should be consistent as a benevolent leader for him and take care not to make decisions that will have negative results, such as being upset or angry when he barks at guests. Calmness begets calmness, and leadership should be about guiding and teaching, not control, anger or dominance.

As a good leader, convincing your dog that he should trust in your decision-making, (such as training new behaviors), will help strengthen your relationship with your dog so he can rely on your choices, plus build the relationship your dog has with anyone that comes to the door.

As you work with your dog, you should also try to desensitize him concerning the biting he does when you take his collar. This is also something that you train when things are calm, slowly adding more distractions and excitement so he understands that having you take his collar is a fun and rewarding “game,” even when the doorbell rings.

To find a good behavior consultant or trainer in your area, please visit:  
[www.sandiegodogtrainers.com](http://www.sandiegodogtrainers.com)

Good luck,

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