Before Any Behavior Work

For families and caregivers

If your dog is growling, snapping, guarding, or biting, contact your veterinarian. Begin with safety and a clearer picture of what is happening.

Bring health into the conversation

Pain and illness can contribute to behavior changes. Tell your veterinarian when the behavior began and describe changes in movement, touch sensitivity, sleep, appetite, thirst, hearing, or vision. Your veterinarian can recommend an examination and any appropriate tests. [1]

Make the next hours safer

Avoid situations already associated with incidents. Where safe and effective, use closed doors, gates, or separate spaces to create distance. Do not force contact or set up a confrontation to see what your dog will do. If a person or animal is injured or in immediate danger, seek appropriate medical, veterinary, or emergency help.

Keep the information visible

Do not punish growling or try to intimidate a dog into appearing calm. A change in what you can see does not establish that the underlying difficulty has resolved. AVSAB recommends reward-based methods and advises against aversive training. [2]

Bring observations rather than a test

Use the companion vet-visit worksheet to record what happens before and after the behavior. Existing short videos can help; do not provoke, approach, or recreate a risky situation to obtain footage.

Build the right support team

Ask your veterinarian about a veterinary behaviorist, particularly when aggression is escalating, injuries have occurred, or children or other vulnerable individuals may be exposed. Veterinary assessment, immediate safety measures, and appropriate behavior support can proceed together. [1, 3]

This book supports observation and understanding alongside veterinary care. It cannot assess an individual dog's medical condition or determine that a situation is safe.

[1] Merck Veterinary Manual Behavior Problems of Dogs
[2] AVSAB Humane Dog Training position statement and current clarification
[3] ACVB Information for animal owners