

Stop Caring What Others Think and Stand Up for Your Dogs

By Jessica Dolce, Dogs in Need of Space and Notes From a Dog Walker



I want to talk to you guys about one of the keys to reducing dog bites (as well as making life better for your dogs all around):

You need to stop caring what anyone else thinks about you and your dog.

If you do this, you will free yourself up to make better choices on behalf of your dogs. When you make better choices, you are setting your dogs up for success in our crazy world. And when you do that, they are less likely to get into trouble which they will wind up paying for big time.

Here's what you need to do:

1. **Stand up for your dogs.** Be assertive in protecting your dog's physical and mental health, as well as the safety of those around them.
2. **When you're not sure if your dog can handle something, always err on the side of caution.** Choose management over "I don't know, so let's find out!"

Dogs need us to do both of these things more often, so that they don't feel like they need to take matters into their own hands teeth.

Obviously, dogs need lots of other things from us to: socialization, training, proper management, and a never ending supply of peanut butter that they can roll around in like it's a canine version of that scene in Indecent Proposal. People also need to learn how to read their dog's body language, understand stress and fear, and not screw their dogs up in general. But we've covered that before, here and all over the web.

What I'm talking about now doesn't really have all that much to do with the dogs. It's about us humans and how uncomfortable many of us are with being forceful, direct, and making unpopular choices that we're afraid will make people not like us. This is causing some problems for our dogs.

Too often we choose not to speak up for our dogs, even as things take a weird turn. We recognize that our dog is uncomfortable with the hyper kids running circles around them. We suspect that the unfamiliar dog approaching our dog isn't as friendly as their owner is claiming. We don't know if our dog is ok with the cleaning lady entering the house while we're gone. But we allow it anyway.

We allow our desire to be perceived as friendly or nice or easy going to override our own gut instincts or what our dog is trying to tell us. Our desire to be liked – to avoid being seen as unfriendly or rude or "bitchy" - is powerful stuff.

It's so powerful, that humans will choose to ignore their own instincts and proceed into potentially dangerous scenarios, just so they don't make a bad impression.

Gavin de Becker, author of *The Gift of Fear*, says that unlike other living creatures, humans will sense danger, yet still walk right into it. “You’re in a hallway waiting for an elevator late at night. Elevator door opens, and there’s a guy inside, and he makes you afraid. You don’t know why, you don’t know what it is. Some memory of this building—whatever it may be. And many women will stand there and look at that guy and say, ‘Oh, I don’t want to think like that. I don’t want to be the kind of person who lets the door close in his face. I’ve got to be nice. I don’t want him to think I’m not nice.’”

If we’re willing to walk right into a metal box with a stranger that totally scares us just so we won’t be seen as rude, imagine how difficult it is for many people to be assertive on behalf of their dogs with nice folks at the park, their neighbors, visitors, family, and friends. We’re willing to deny our fear around murderers. It’s no wonder we’re not comfortable speaking up for ourselves around people we pass on a dog walk.

The problem with our discomfort is that dog bites often happen when we are:

1. In denial about our dog’s limitations and/or their behavior issues. To be a good advocate for them, dogs need you to see them as they are, in the present.
2. We know their limits, but we still hesitate to take action.

And the flip side of suspecting or knowing your dog has issues and not speaking up is:

3. When we are in complete denial that our “good” dogs would ever bite someone.

Number 3 is a whole blog in and of itself. This blog is really about the first two points. But I’ll sum up #3 real quick for good measure:

All dogs have the potential to bite. ALL of them. Breed, size, age, zodiac sign – doesn’t matter. Push any dog hard and long enough or in just the right way (You mean it’s not OK for my 2 year old to crawl into my “good” dog’s crate while he’s sleeping?) and they run out of options and will bite. So don’t push any dog’s luck. Don’t allow them to be treated roughly or inappropriately or fail to properly supervise them because they’re such “good dogs.” Your dog needs you to stop thinking they’re a robot with no limits and respect their boundaries. Don’t fool yourself. Your dog will appreciate it if you help them out by setting them up to be good.

When we let dogs bite, the dogs pay for it. They might hurt a person or another dog or get hurt themselves. They might cause your home owner’s insurance to drop you and then you can’t keep your dog. They might be declared dangerous. They might make the news and inflame the public into calling for a ban on all dogs that look like your dog. They might be taken from you and euthanized.

Dog bites aren’t the only consequence, of course. When we don’t step up other not-so-great stuff happens, like we put our dogs into situations that make them stressed and miserable. Or they have a bad experience with another dog and then they become a DINOS. But this post isn’t about dog behavior. It’s about us and our malfunctions.

Sometimes, we have to step out of our comfort zone in order to be effective advocates for our dog’s safety and health. Do not let others pressure you. Stop caring what anyone else thinks and just do what you know is right for your dogs.

Now, I recognize that there are things that happen that are beyond our control. Also, I understand that sometimes we genuinely think we’re making the right choice and it turns out to be the wrong one. And of course, I want you to socialize, train, and do new stuff with your dogs, which means that inevitably there will be goof ups. I get it. That’s life.

What I'm talking about here is when you're hesitant to do what **you know** needs to be done or when **you're afraid to err** on the side of caution because you think it'll make you like a "square."

So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to give you all permission to stand up for yourselves and your dogs. You have to do it. Your dogs need you to do it.

The next time someone tries to force themselves or their dog onto your dog, you're going to boldly step in front of your dogs and say "STOP." Say it like you mean it. Then drop the mic and walk away.

The next time someone comes over to your house and you're not sure if your dog will be OK with them, you're going to put your dog in another room or in their crate or on a leash. When your friend visits with their little kids or the landscaper need to use your bathroom or the police* bangs on your door, you're not going to hold your breath and see what happens. You're going to tighten up your core muscles and say, "Please wait while I put my dog away." When they say, "It's OK, I love dogs", you will hold your ground and follow through with the plan.

And the next time you're at the vet or the groomers and you don't like the way they're handling your dog, you're going to say, "We need to do this another way." I struggled with this one. But I'm over it now. Same thing goes for trainers. If you don't like they way a trainer is working with your dog, you're going to say, "Thanks, but we need something different."

Yes, the other person may say nasty things to you or about you. They might call you a "bitch." I want you to not care. Because in that moment **what you really are is your dog's hero**. You just took their well-being into your hands and acted with conviction. You made the right choice and they're safe because of you. Bravo.

And who cares what people call you? As my future BFF Tina Fey says, "Bitches get stuff done. Bitch is the new black."

Look, the other person will get over it. They might not even care at all. For them, the discomfort of dealing with hero-you won't last long. Even if it does, even if your neighbors think you're kind of stand-offish, it's not rocking their world. But for you, the consequences of not standing up for your dogs might be long-lasting and deep-cutting. Set those limits, then don't give a hoot what anyone thinks about you.

p.s. There are other ways to set limits and not giving a crap what anyone thinks, like: if they need it, walk your dog with a muzzle on. You will get weird looks. But you don't care, cuz you're being Safety First.

Hey, I know this is uncomfortable for some of you. But **I know you can do it because you love your dogs**.

If it helps, I want you to think of me standing next to you, cheering you on as you stand up for your dog's needs. I'm five feet worth and I don't have a problem saying "No" to anyone if it means making sure my dogs don't get into trouble or have a bad experience. So picture me there beside you the next time you need a boost. Know that every time you make that tough choice to stand for your up dogs, I'm yelling, "Rock Star!!" just for you.

Now go get 'em Tiger.

** You have the right to secure your dog before letting the police enter your property. ALWAYS do it.*