

Dianna Young on Dogs: Step Up as Leader



by [Dianna Young](#)

My husband, Jason, spotted the woman across the supermarket parking lot about a football field away, locked on his little group like enemy radar and moving in their direction at warp speed.

Jason had come to the parking lot to teach a class on canine obedience amidst moderate distractions, and about a dozen people and their dogs were participating in the class.

As he lectured and demonstrated dog-handling techniques, Jason kept one eye on the woman, who was closing fast. When she neared his group, Jason noticed that she was focused on one particular animal, a beautiful German Shepherd Dog of exceptionally hard character that was working with its handler on exercises. The handler, a very capable person, had her back to the approaching woman.

As the intruder hurried closer, Jason noted that she stared intently at the dog. The handler still was not aware of her approach, but the handler's dog by now was staring back at the woman with an intensity that equaled her own.

Apparently, the well-intentioned woman was responding to an urge to pet this beautiful animal. The dog was getting ready to respond to an urge of its own.

Just before the woman reached the dog, Jason stepped forward and placed himself between them.

"Whoa, whoa!" he told the woman. "He's the wrong dog for that!"

At this point the handler realized what had been about to happen, and jumped into the conversation.

"He doesn't do well with people coming at him head-on," she told the woman.

The woman stopped. Perhaps embarrassed now by Jason and the handler, she turned to walk away, but paused to toss the angry comment, "That dog must not be very well so-

cialized!”

Actually, the dog was quite well socialized. It just didn't have a personality that permitted it to enjoy a friendly mauling by a complete stranger. And rather than criticizing the dog or his training, the woman might have considered saying, “Thanks for keeping me from getting bitten.”

In fact, if Jason or the dog's handler had not intervened, this dog probably would have bitten the woman.

The incident provided Jason with some excellent lessons to share with his class ;

- The first lesson was, if you feel the inexplicable urge to fondle a strange dog, never approach it without permission from its handler. Even with permission, approach indirectly to avoid causing the animal to believe that you're trying to dominate it.
- Lesson number two was, if you are a handler and someone approaches your dog with the intention of touching it, there is nothing the matter with stepping between that person and the dog and informing the person politely that the dog doesn't like to be handled by strangers.



The two dogs on the left are fairly approachable. The little one on the right, not so much. Always ask first.

Look at it this way: Would you allow a stranger to rush up to your small child and fondle the child's face or run fingers through your child's hair? Would you allow a stranger to do the same to you? Why, then, would you allow someone to do that to your dog?

This meeting-a-stranger scenario can be critical to you and your dog because if you don't handle it correctly it can undermine your whole relationship.

Virtually all strangers who approach are well-intentioned, and many handlers see no harm in allowing the scenario to play out. But that may not be the way your dog sees it. I was in a public venue a few years ago with a client who simply could not comprehend what was such a big deal about a stranger coming up and petting her somewhat uncomfortable dog.

“I’ll show you what I’m talking about,” I told her.

I left the client and walked halfway across the shopping center parking lot, then turned and caught her eye. I was about to do a little role-playing. Focused intently on her, I walked toward her at a rapid pace, never taking my eyes from hers. Still staring hard, I walked directly up to her and into her space, and then reached out and touched her face.

I could see her recoil slightly.

“Now picture that if I were a stranger,” I told her.

She got it.

“Oh, my goodness!” she said. “That was creepy! If that really happened to me I’d be reaching for my can of Mace!”

To boil this down to its essence, *your dog needs to be able to count on its leader in encounters with strangers*. If you stand back and let strangers accost him, you are not being a leader. And in the absence of a leader, your dog will assume the position by default. He has no choice; the behavior is encoded in his doggy DNA. If he – not you – is the pack leader, this will make itself felt in all aspects of your relationship.

You can avoid all the problems associated with this by stepping up to your leadership responsibility.



Let me tell you about the experience of one of my clients recently on Alki Beach in Seattle, where we were working with her pup. The day was sunny, and a lot of walkers, joggers, skateboarders and bicyclists were enjoying the area. My client’s puppy was a magnet for passers-by, many of whom wanted to man-handle it in a friendly manner. My client allowed anyone to do so. The puppy tolerated it, but I could see anxiety build up in the pup every time a person approached. My client didn’t understand where the anxiety was coming from. I explained it to her, and told her what we needed to do about it.

A minute later, a couple came down the street toward us. The man was pretty large,

six-three or six-four and impressively built. The woman was pretty big herself, and together they were quite imposing. As they approached they spotted the pup. I could see their eyes light up, and they made a course correction that would bring them and us together.

This time, however, my client stepped between them and her dog, put her hand out, and very nicely explained, “My pup is in training. I appreciate your intent, and thank you so much, but it would be better if you didn’t pet her.”

The pup of course understood none of the conversation, but it watched what her owner had done. My client was a petite woman, and next to this imposing couple she looked tiny. Yet she had stepped forward, put up her hand and – in her puppy’s eyes – had stopped a speeding bullet. The look on the pup’s face was priceless.

In the hour that we worked together that day, my client stopped about eight speeding bullets. With each repetition the puppy became more and more self-assured. With every new encounter, the pup looked to its owner expectantly, and by the eighth repetition we could see that the pup was confident that the next stranger would be stopped.

Some dogs actually like the attention of strangers. A lot of dogs don’t, but will tolerate it. Some dogs, like the German Shepherd Dog in Jason’s class, won’t even tolerate it.

You can relieve your dog of a lot of anxiety by following the example of my Seattle client. Think of yourself as your dog’s personal Secret Service agent. When the President of the United States travels, he travels with agents who are in charge of security. Their job is to scan for trouble and to put themselves between it and the President. This frees up the President to avoid worrying about that issue and to concentrate on doing his own job.

By intervening with people who approach uninvited, you clearly demonstrate to your dog that you are in charge of your pack’s security. Not only does that lift a lot of stress from your dog, it sends a message to your dog as well. The message is that you clearly are its leader, because in the canine world, the job of pack security always is reserved for the pack leader.

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