

# BOUND ANGELS

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## Barrier Aggression

*This article is written primarily for shelter, rescue or humane society employees / volunteers to deal with shelter dogs.*

There are various types of aggression a dog may exhibit, and there are as many different ways to deal with these behaviors, as there are behaviors. Barrier aggression is one of the more common reasons dogs are killed in shelters. When dogs are kept in confined areas they will guard these areas, and humans often unknowingly reinforce this behavior. If a dog is sitting behind a gate and barks at passersby, and these people leave, the dog's behavior is reinforced. "You walk up to my gate, I bark, you leave." Every time this happens – it's reinforced. If the dog is fearful and gets you to retreat with a bark, he holds the upper hand and his mind is taught that his "strength" has moved you away, therefore you must have had the intention of hurting him.

In normal life, dogs can transfer this behavior to running under beds or into confined areas and exhibiting some "aggression" when we try to get them out. Barking or charging at the gate in a kennel is a tougher situation to deal with and I'd like to dedicate this article solely to that behavior. The key to remember is that oftentimes dogs that exhibit barrier aggression may not be aggressive once they are removed from the confines of the kennel; they are merely aggressive over a territory / area, or worse yet fearful over what "might" happen there. I do urge you to use extreme caution in approaching dogs that posture and exhibit these behaviors. This behavior can be dealt with, but there is an inherent risk of being bit.

To work with a dog that exhibits this behavior we focus on positive reinforcement training techniques. I've outlined several of these in other articles, blog posts and trainings, however I'll address them again here. Irrelevant of how this behavior started, we need to focus on the solution. It might be nice to know how it started, but if you're dealing with dogs in a shelter we need to spend our time and energy on solving the issue instead of figuring out how it started.

First and foremost we can start to reinforce other behaviors almost immediately with just a little bit of patience. If we approach a dog's kennel that is lunging and barking, the best solution is to remain still. Its important to note that yelling commands through the kennel door will not help... NOT AT ALL. What we will do is wait for the dog to STOP the behavior and reinforce *that* moment. For the skeptics – it DOES work. It takes time, but it works. If you open the kennel door while the dog is acting like a nut, you'll be dealing with a nutty dog. Eventually ALL dogs calm down. If you have the time, the dog will calm down, or pass out from exhaustion. It is our goal to get the dog to recognize that he is being rewarded for a behavior that we approve of; we merely need to get him to volunteer that behavior. I wait for the second he offers the new behavior (calmness- even for a moment) and then I use a treat to show him that I approve of the changed behavior. As soon as the dog stops lunging / charging / barking, I give him a treat and a verbal re-enforcement such as GOOD or YES. With baby steps I will use this approach to eventually open the kennel door, slip a lead around his neck and walk him out of the kennel.

Timing is the key because the dog may only remain calm for a second before jumping back into drive. If you miss it – you missed the opportunity. Your reward has to come immediately.

There was a dog at a local shelter that had such serious barrier aggression that no one would walk him or stand in front of his kennel. People actually walked a wide bend around his kennel door in order to avoid him. I got him out, worked with him and eventually he found a great home. He was a super dog that just hated being confined. However, the more he hated it and expressed it in “his” way, the worse it got. He simply needed to understand that he would get out with some work. I went down to the shelter for several days and retrained some volunteers on how to work with him. This eventually saved his life. I do have to admit that he could have been seen as a bit threatening to the average person. However afterwards he was a total gentle-dog.

Solving barrier aggression can be as simple as standing in front of a kennel and waiting for the dog to change and rewarding *that* change. If the dog is mouthy or you fear a bite, you can drop the treat on the floor. I do not suggest immediately handling a dog that has shown aggression. Even if they do calm down they may still be in drive and *that* drive can be reignited at anytime.

The key signal a dog is looking for is a *reaction to his action*. If he barks, he expects you to back up. We know that when dealing with an aggressive dog, it’s always better to remain still than run, the same holds true with dogs that guard the front of a kennel. We neither aggress nor regress – we remain still. This stillness teaches the dog that we mean no harm. Once the dog shows comfort with your presence near the front of his kennel, we move closer and wait until eventually we can open the kennel door and get the dog out. There is no way to correct a dog behind a kennel door so waiting for a change in behavior is the only viable solution. We remove our ego and focus on the method.

As I mentioned previously dogs that have barrier aggression issues are not always aggressive when removed from the confines of their kennel. This will be something important to determine once the dog is evaluated. Kennel / barrier issues alone are not a reason to destroy a dog. They can be fixed and / or worked with rather simply.

There are also dogs that crouch in the back corner of their cell when we open the kennel door. This is a bit trickier because the dog will strike if he feels threatened; and he will feel threatened if he cannot regress. He has forced himself into a corner and is forcing his own behavior. Oftentimes kennel workers are bitten when they get into the cell and reach over these dogs to noose them. If a dog is crouched in a corner I spend a bit of time in the dogs cell in order to build a level of trust with him. I will drop treats on the floor, speak softly and lay the leash on the floor and gently move it. I want the dog to be desensitized to the leash before I ever put it around the dog’s neck. He should not fear the leash or me; he should accept them as part of the deal. Again, he doesn’t need to like them – he needs to accept them.

When I open a kennel door I never stand full face to the dog. Instead I approach a dog somewhat sideways, especially dogs that are fearful or dominant. I can gauge a dog’s behavior and body language better by removing anything that he may see as a threat. I’ve used this principle in handling countless dogs ranging from large breeds such as Rottweilers to Pit Bulls as well as smaller dogs such as Chihuahuas and terriers. The behavior is the same no matter the size or breed of dog.

I use a slip lead to handle the dog. They are easy to toss over the dog's head and pull snug and they don't require me to come into direct physical contact with the dog. Once the noose is over the dog's head I move out and expect the dog to follow me. I may coax him along with some gentle tugs, but I do not engage the dog at this time. If he pulls back, I keep walking. My primary goal is to get him out of the kennel, not to deal with him in the kennel.

To break this process down simply:

1. Approach the kennel door in a calm – neutral manner. Not overly friendly or playful.
2. Wait patiently for the dog to calm down, or at least become calm about your presence before opening the door.
3. If the dog becomes agitated at any point, STOP. Wait for the behavior to settle before moving forward. The key word here is STOP – not regress. Whatever it is that is making the dog nervous, wait there and let him see that there is no reason to be fearful.
4. Patience is the key to solving barrier aggression. Regressing from the front of the kennel of a dog in drive will only reinforce his behaviors.

There is a difference between a dog that is excited and happy from a dog that is in a state drive that can spawn aggression. Our goal is to reward a positive behavior or to encourage a dog to move toward positive behaviors that we can reward. These techniques are designed to deal with dogs with difficult behavior issues whether they are fear or dominance based. Dominance and fear should be approached differently once in direct contact with the animal, however when dealing with remote training (where we are not in direct physical contact with the dog), the technique is to first get a dog to exhibit a behavior that we can reward before moving forward. Our goal must be to give a chance to a dog that is misunderstood and can be rehabilitated.

*Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.*

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