

Managing a Charging Dog

By

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"We have a new foster dog (a pure bred Rottie) who has a bad habit of randomly charging people. There's no pattern to the behavior and she generally stops within a few feet of the person she's charging - no biting but occasionally nipping. Any ideas on what we might do to curb this? Thanks!"

Great question.

First, "hats off" and a genuine appreciation for fostering a big, powerful and charging dog. People who take on this kind of challenge are few and far between and have my respect. It is not an easy, self-appointed assignment.

Or, maybe the charging wasn't evident until after you got her home?! Often, behaviors will not be exhibited until after the dog has "settled in."

Let's guess why this dog was surrendered? We can also bear witness to which dogs are most likely NOT going to make it out of a shelter unless for people like you.

Charging dogs are often full of themselves and they get a big rush out of the rushing ceremony. A charging dog is going to get herself (and whoever is her human companion) into some serious trouble, sooner or later. Without knowing more history, it wouldn't surprise me if this was an adolescent. Charging is no fault of the dog. It's a habit that is addictive, self-reinforcing and everyone will be better off if it is brought to an end.

Every time a dog charges another person, the person being charged will likely feel threatened, frightened and/or put at risk for injury. Every time a dog charges another person, the entire breed is put at risk for being profiled as undesirable. This is the problem with any breed, especially strong, powerful breeds. They will all get a bad rap. (Consider the pit bulls who are genetically one of the most people-friendly dogs. Denial of socialization, abuse and media coverage generate an inaccurate societal branding of the breed). We have all heard of someone saying, "When I was little I was attacked by a ... (dog breed) or, "I know someone who was attacked by a ... (dog breed).

The bottom line is this: We are responsible for how the dog(s) in our care will interface with others who come into their space and vice versa, (be they two or four-legged animals).

When we say, “there is no pattern to the behavior...” we are limiting ourselves to thinking that we are able to assess the pattern in the same context as does the dog. Are we sure we can do this? Dogs see, hear, and smell (sense/perceive) well beyond what the human is capable. They are sophisticates of body language. Just because we don’t see whatever it is that triggers the behavior, doesn’t mean it is not there.

Here is a simple approach that is as easy to embrace as is our commitment to our dog:

1. Assume that the charging will always happen.
2. Prepare your self prior to the opportunity and...
3. Prevent it from happening.

What is it they say about the barn door and horse? We owe it to the dog and ourselves to not allow them to perform the behavior that will get them in trouble and/or killed. Dogs will always take the fall for our (mis)management.

Having the instruction and confidence of what to do to help with a problematic behavior can make the difference - so here we go:

A new management tool on the landscape for people with big and powerful dogs is the “easywalk” harness by Premier Products. It is much more accommodating than the gentle leader (which many dogs and people resist). Each has their place in the arsenal of management tools but the “easy walk” harness is a true godsend. It disables the dog’s oppositional reflex and power to pull harder because the attachment ring is at the dog’s chest rather than on the center of the back or the collar. We have been introducing this equipment in our training classes (www.doggoneconnection.com) ever since we have discovered them. It would be nice if everyone with a powerful dog had the opportunity to experiment with these appliance with an experienced trainer for correct fitting (important) and use.

Here’s how to go about this:

- Get the dog acclimated to being receptive to the application of the harness.
- Get YOURSELF acclimated to the habit of applying the harness (with lead attached!) before opening the door, gate, or in anticipation of people coming into your dog’s space.

Use it for walking the dog. (As a matter of personal preference, I prefer to use a 6-foot horse lead/rope with a small snap vs. a regular dog lead. The thickness makes for an easier grasp and better feeling of control).

Show me a dog who is wearing one of these harnesses with the lead attached and in the hands of the two- legged animal standing firmly on the other end and I will show you a dog who cannot charge, cannot rehearse the undesirable behavior and who has the opportunity to greet another person with some self control.

When walking your dog with one of these, make frequent turns. If the dog pulls, stop. Proceed when the dog complies with stopping, (pulling makes the walk end, not pulling allows the walk to continue). Progress and settling down comes about gradually and over time.

The safety net of your caring for these dogs will be a lifetime.

Thanks for being there for this dog.

Warren