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# What to Do If Your Pet Doesn't Like You

Know the body language and behaviors that mean you are the problem.



By Roxanna Coldiron



When we imagine taking home [our pet from the animal shelter](#), many of us assume that our new four-legged friend will exude gratitude and want our affection right away. While it's certainly true that some animals warm up to their new human companions immediately, that's not always the case. You may bring home a dog or cat that hisses or growls at you, or backs away from your touch. It hurts when you can't just tell your new friend that you love them and mean no harm, and you might even feel as if the pet doesn't like you. So how can you bridge the communication gap and build a bond?

Dr. Victoria Cussen, Director of Research at the [ASPCA Anti-Cruelty Behavior Team](#) says that the animal's behavior is likely not personal. "It reflects their fear or anxiety about the changes that happened in their life (new home, new people), not their feelings about you in particular," she explains. "Seeing things from their perspective can help us be patient and give them the time they need to acclimate to their new home." It takes time to [build that relationship](#) with our pets.

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## Pay Attention to Your Pet's Behavior

Animals show their mistrust towards a human in their behavior. If the animal doesn't know you very well yet, this is a result of the newness of the situation and perhaps a reflection of past experience with humans. But if your dog or cat is suddenly showing [signs of aggression](#) toward you, it's time to look for additional underlying causes. According to Dr. Rachel Malamed, DVM, DACVB, CABC, veterinary behavior specialist at [BehaviorDogtor.com](#), your animal could be reacting to your behavior toward them. "The use of confrontational techniques such as physical or verbal reprimands have been shown to increase aggressive behavior and diminish trust," she says. "Unfortunately, punishment only intensifies the pet's fear and the aggression usually worsens." Animals that are [in pain](#) can also show signs of aggression. Pet parents should pay attention to these [behavior cues](#)—tucked ears, cowering,

growling and hissing, eye contact avoidance, trembling—and consider the reasons behind them.

Do not ignore them: If a cat feels like you will ignore hissing, the cat may start scratching to show displeasure instead. Dogs can escalate from growling to biting. Dr. Malamed suggests avoiding [behaviors that trigger](#) these responses from our animals (for example, don't pet your cat's tummy if she doesn't like it) or changing the animal's emotional responses toward the trigger (for example, train your cat to like her carrier).

## Introduce New People and Places Slowly

It's natural to feel unsure of a new place or a new person. "While [adoption](#) is a joyous time for humans, it may be stressful at first for the pet," says Dr. Cussen. "Both cats and dogs are social species and have evolved behaviors related to forming and maintaining social bonds, so they often need time to adjust to new people, places, and things. It's natural for a new pet to take time acclimating to their new surroundings, so make sure you're introducing them to new people and spaces slowly." Overwhelming your pets in new surroundings can make them feel fearful and aggressive. Be mindful of your [pet's personality](#) and of the way that they take in the world around them.

Dr. Cussen also suggests not putting your dog in situations that he or she isn't ready for. "For example, you may want your dog to learn to do something—like [swim](#)—but if they're showing you signs that they're not ready, such as backing away in fear, it's important not to push them," she says. "Similarly, many pet owners want their dogs to play in [dog parks](#). If you do provide your dog with an opportunity to play with other dogs, make sure you're observing the play—if [your dog is being bullied](#), you should intervene on their behalf." Your pet needs to know that you are on their side and can protect them.

## Learn and Accept Your Pet's Preferences

Some pets might like being held and comforted. Others will need to be coaxed out of their shell over time. "Try to accept and embrace your pet's individuality and preferences," says Dr. Malamed. "Sometimes, we need to adjust our goals and expectations to satisfy your pet's needs and 'meet them halfway.'" Pet owners also need to understand how their animals communicate with them. Certain gestures from us could trigger a negative response from them. "Gazing into a dog's eyes, an outreached hand, petting, sudden and unpredictable movement, and even leaning over a dog can cause a dog to show signs of fear or aggression," she says. Cats need to be able to claim space as [their territory](#), and our homes should reflect their need for territorial command. Learning which gestures are generally approved by cats or dogs is the first step in accepting their preferences and communicating with them on their terms.

## Develop a Means of Communication

Humans and animals speak different languages, especially in terms of our non-verbal cues. "Developing a clear system of communication through [basic training](#), and then using that system to teach your pet what they should and shouldn't do, will allow your pet to understand how their actions impact their life in a predictable way," explains Dr. Cussen. "Being consistent with your system is also important." Using spoken language to get your pet to understand why you are asking them to do something doesn't work, but staying consistent with your cues for particular commands and other behaviors establishes predictability and builds trust with your pet.

Training also provides [mental stimulation for your pet](#). Dr. Cussen says that this can help the animals to channel their natural energy, [promotes feelings of calmness](#), and prevents behavior problems in the future. Your pet has an opportunity to please you and learns what you expect, all while getting a reward for good behavior and affectionate praise from their new favorite person. Training sessions are a great way to bond with your companion animal.