**Should Your Dog Sleep on the Bed with You?**

**The dog who wants to sleep on your bed just wants to be close to his humans—and comfortable!**

By Pat Miller

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Contrary to the strongly held opinion of some training and behavior professionals, I’m generally pretty comfortable with allowing canine family members on their humans’ beds. In our family, two of our five dogs sleep with my husband and me. Scooter, a Pomeranian, routinely sleeps with us; Dubhy, our Scottish Terrier, graces us with the privilege of his presence on our bed only from time to time.

Trainers who adamantly oppose dogs on the bed mostly fall into the old-fashioned training camp, and often, they also buy into all the dominance stuff that’s been pretty much discredited by behavioral scientists. Chances are good I would differ with them on many dog training and philosophical issues, not just this one. The dog who wants to sleep on your bed isn’t trying to take over the world. He just wants to be close to his humans -and comfortable!

That said, there are times when I agree that allowing your dog on your bed may be inappropriate. Three of our dogs sleep elsewhere, for various reasons. Our Cardigan Corgi, Lucy, sleeps shut in her crate in our bedroom to forestall her predilection for midnight cat-chasing forays. Scorgidoodle Bonnie is also crated at night; she can’t seem to reliably hold her bladder until morning when given house freedom overnight. Her intense snuggling and licking behaviors can also be annoying in the wee hours of the morning. Missy, our 11-year-old Aussie, sleeps on a magnetic dog bed next to ours; she has weak hindquarters due to a formerly broken pelvis (acquired long before joining our family) and can’t jump on and off of the bed.

So how do you decide if bed privileges are the right choice for your canine pal? There are a number of things to take into consideration.

**Personal Choice**

All other issues notwithstanding, if you prefer that your dog not sleep on the bed with you, the case is closed. It’s your choice, pure and simple, and not one you should have to defend to anyone. There may be a rare exception, but I can’t think of any reason why a dog should have to sleep on your bed.

Of course, if he’s accustomed to sleeping on his human’s bed and you abruptly evict him, he’s likely to tell you how he feels about it in no uncertain terms. You may have to do some behavior modification to convince him that other bedtime arrangements are acceptable alternatives, but that’s doable. If you want your dogs off the bed, the only real issue might be a human bed partner who prefers them on. I’m a dog behavior professional; I’ll leave this human conflict for you to sort out with your marriage counselor!

**Dogs in the Room**

Some humans restrict their dogs’ presence from the bedroom altogether, citing reasons such as allergies, and being disturbed by nighttime scratching, licking, and other typical canine behavior.

Some dogs are perfectly comfortable and confident when sleeping in other parts of the house; others benefit greatly from the six to eight hours of social proximity to their humans, even though there’s not much actual interaction going on. Sleeping in the same room is a nice, usually easy way for your dog to be with you, especially if you are gone at work eight or more hours a day. A white noise machine can cover up a lot of minor nighttime dog noises.

There are actually some behavior problems that can be resolved by bringing your dog into someone’s bedroom, whether yours or that of a responsible child. I heard from an owner recently whose 8-year-old dog, who had always slept downstairs, started barking in the middle of the night for no apparent reason. Efforts to determine the reason for the dog’s barking were fruitless.

I suggested that the owner have the dog sleep in her bedroom at night. The dog now sleeps quietly all night on a dog bed next to the owner’s. Problem solved—and the owner tells me it delights her to be able to look over the edge of her bed and see her beloved dog sleeping peacefully there. She can’t for the life of her remember why her canine pal had to sleep downstairs for eight years.

**Inappropriate Non-Aggressive Bed Behaviors**

There are many non-aggressive yet annoying, disruptive, dangerous, or otherwise inappropriate behaviors your uncrated and unsupervised dog can do at night. Lucy’s cat-chasing and Bonnie’s peeing are just two examples. Others include chewing on electrical cords and other potentially hazardous materials, destroying treasured possessions, romping on and off the bed, and getting into cupboards—behaviors that are disruptive and dangerous enough to demand nighttime confinement. For this reason, I recommend crating dogs who haven’t yet learned house manners (and especially young pups) at night.

**Aggressive Bed Behaviors**

This is the big one. What do you do when your dog offers aggressive behaviors on the bed? Does it mean instant eviction? Not necessarily.

This is where trainers who strongly believe that most unwanted dog behaviors are related to dominance (I’ve heard them dubbed “alpha-holics”) are likely to tell you that your dog is trying to take over the world. They will say that allowing the dog on the bed gives him status and a physical height advantage, reinforcing his sense of being in control. This may contain some grains of truth, but by no means can it explain what is always going on.

There is a legitimate classification of aggression now often referred to as “status-related aggression,” in which a dog behaves in an aggressive manner rather than deferring appropriately to his human. Bed-related aggression is sometimes one manifestation of this.

If a client of mine has a dog with aggressive bed behaviors I may suggest revoking his bed privileges, but I may not. If I do, it has nothing to do with forcefully establishing a social hierarchy, and far more to do with managing an unwanted behavior to prevent it from being reinforced while we work, non-aggressively, to modify it.

Which tactic I take depends on the dog, the level of aggression, and what’s motivating it. If it’s a classic case of owner-guarding—wife is in the bed, dog growls at husband when he tries to get in bed—then yes, bed privileges need to be revoked. The dog’s, not the husband’s! If the spouse being guarded is reluctant to remove the potential threat to the spouse trying to enter the bed, it’s time for another trip to that marriage counselor! I take the same approach if the dog is guarding his or her territory; the dog needs to be evicted unless and until the behavior can be modified.

Keep in mind that removing the dog from the bed doesn’t modify the bed-guarding behavior; it only prevents the dog from having an opportunity to practice the behavior. Some owners are fine with management alone, while others are committed to modifying the behavior in the hopes of reinstating the dog’s bed privileges.

Modifying your dog’s aggressive behavior is not a bad idea; there’s a good chance that the dog who guards the bed may also guard the sofa and other prime pieces of household real estate. Help him become more comfortable with humans, and work to reduce or eliminate his perceived need to behave in an aggressive manner. This will help keep you and any other humans he comes in contact with safe, and increases the odds that he’ll stay in your home—and that your relationship with your significant other will last! (See ﻿Modifying Bed/Owner Guarding)

Years ago, a client in Santa Cruz, California, asked me to come to her home to address a bed-guarding problem with her Yorkshire Terrier. Once there, I realized that bed-guarding was the tip of the problem-behavior iceberg. The Yorkie and the husband had a seriously adversarial relationship; simply banning the dog from the bed wasn’t going to resolve it. The little dog growled at the husband if the man approached him on the sofa, and even if he was sitting on the man’s lap. To make matters worse, the husband refused to understand or accept that he needed to change his behavior in order to help the dog change his. The man seemed to enjoy taunting the dog.

The icing on the cake, however, was that the wife obviously took satisfaction in the fact that the Yorkie wouldn’t let the husband in the bed. This was clearly one for the marriage counselor. The little dog was eventually rehomed to a more suitable environment.

If the bed-aggressive behavior is not about guarding or protecting humans or territory, the prognosis is not so bleak. What’s driving the behavior? Can the cause—the antecedent of the behavior—be managed without booting the dog off the bed?

When we adopted our Pomeranian bed-buddy, Scooter, he brought along a lot of behavioral baggage. He had failed his shelter assessment when he fiercely guarded a pig ear, so we knew about that one. We would quickly discover several more challenging behaviors.

We tried crating him the first night and he screamed his furry little head off, despite the fact that he had happily entered and stayed in his crate earlier for part of the day. House freedom was out of the question; we didn’t know him well enough yet, we didn’t trust our bigger dogs with him without supervision, and although at age seven he was a mature adult dog, he had already demonstrated his inability to hold his bladder more than a couple of hours. (The quarter-sized bladder stone our vet removed a month later explained this phenomenon.) So we put Scooter on the bed.

One of Scooter’s early behavior challenges was stress-licking. Our new pint-sized pooch woke me up in the middle of the night, constantly licking his front paws. Sleepily, I reached down to gently push his face away from his feet and BAM! In an instant he snarled ferociously and bit my hand three times in rapid succession.

There was no blood. In fact, I never even felt the pressure of his teeth on my skin. Despite his ferocious threat display, the little guy had admirable bite inhibition. He didn’t want to hurt me, he just wanted me not to push on him. So I obliged; I’m a fast learner! And yes, he stayed on the bed.

Over the months since we adopted him almost a year ago we’ve worked to get him more comfortable with being touched, nudged, and picked up, using counter-conditioning to give him a positive association with those interactions. And we use management. If we need to move him from one spot to another or interrupt his licking (which has greatly decreased as his stress has diminished), rather than push, we simply lift the covers to slide him to a new spot.

If you are experiencing bed-related aggression, take the time to analyze what’s going on. If it’s a non-guarding behavior that can be managed, you can manage and live with it, or manage and modify. If it’s guarding, or some other aggression trigger that’s not easily managed, then “off the bed” is a wise step, at least until the behavior can be modified.

**Revoking Bed Privileges**

Of course, moving your dog from your bed to his crate can present its own challenges, especially if he isn’t already crate-trained or if he already has a negative association with crating (see “[Crate Difficulties](http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/8_5/features/15713-1.html),”May 2005). If your dog doesn’t already love his crate, you’ll need to transition your dog to nighttime crating gradually. Alternatively, you could put him in an exercise pen or use a baby gate to keep him in a safe area as an interim solution—or even a long-term sleeping arrangement if you prefer not to crate.

Get him accustomed to his soon-to-be new sleeping location as a daytime game, by using treats, stuffed Kongs, and other delectables to convince him that wonderful things happen in the designated area.

Meanwhile, add a blanket to your own bed for him to sleep on while awaiting the transition to his new quarters. When you’re ready to make the move, transfer his blanket to his new sleeping spot as well, so he has the familiar sleeping association in his bedroom.

When he’s happy to hop into his new quarters and stay in for an hour or more without a fuss during the day, start sending him there at bedtime. The first time you do, be sure he’s had a very full day with lots of exercise, so he’s ready for a good night’s sleep.

Our dogs seem content with their sleeping arrangements. Oh sure, the three dogs who sleep elsewhere would probably rather be on the bed with us! But even without their nighttime behavior challenges, three is company, four is a small crowd. If you count the two or three cats who occasionally join us on the bed, several more dogs on the bed are simply out of the question.

**Modifying Bed- or Owner-Guarding**

So you have a dog who guards the bed, or guards you on the bed. What next? You don’t necessarily have to prohibit him from ever getting on the bed (or other furniture), but you do need a way to peacefully remove him from furniture when you need him to get off. And ultimately you’d like him to peacefully accept people approaching the bed.

**Note: Canine aggression is not something to play with. If the level of your dog’s growling or other bed-related aggression is intense; if you are trying to work with it and not making progress; or if someone is getting bitten, please seek the assistance of a qualified positive behavior professional. If you’re afraid of your dog’s behavior, don’t attempt any of the following without professional assistance.**

**• Teach “Off"**

To start, you can teach an operant cue to ask the dog to happily hop off the bed when asked. This is pretty simple. Say “Up!” to invite him on the bed. Lure him up if necessary. When he’s up, click and treat. Then say “Off!” and toss a tasty treat on the floor. When he jumps off to get it, click; he’ll get the treat off the floor himself, thank you very much. After several repetitions of this, start fading the lure, by giving the “Up” or “Off” cue and then waiting a few seconds to see if he does the requested behavior.

If he doesn’t, motion suggestively but don’t toss the treat on the floor or lure him on the bed. When he responds, click and treat. Gradually reduce the suggestive movement until he’s doing the “Up” and “Off” behavior on verbal cue only. Then you can start alternating other forms of reinforcement. If you click you must feed the treat, but occasionally you can skip the click and treat, just praising instead, or giving him a scratch behind the ear, or inviting him outside for a game of fetch.

**• Institute a “Say Please” program**

"Say please" simply means teaching your dog to "ask" for all the good things by sitting first. "Sit" is a deference behavior, and when your dog learns to sit for the first time, he learns to be more deferent. "Want a cookie?" Sit first. "Want to go outside?" Sit first. "Want your dinner bowl?" Sit first. "Want me to throw the ball?" Sit first. You get the idea.

If status is part of what’s motivating your dog’s aggression when he’s on your bed, convincing him to be voluntarily more deferent to you by sitting for good stuff can help modify his bed behavior. Of course, that alone won’t likely fix it; you’ll still need to do some modification work.

**Modifying Bed- or Owner-Guarding Cont'd**

**• Apply a counter-conditioning protocol**

Your dog growls at someone approaching the bed because something about that approach is stressful for him. If you can change his association with and his emotional response to the person approaching, he will change his behavior.

If he’s growling at you when he’s on the bed, arm yourself with a pouch full of very tasty treats. Canned chicken, rinsed and drained, is my preferred treat for counter-conditioning. With your dog on the bed, walk casually past and toss a few bits of chicken to him on the bed. You’re not asking him to get off in this exercise.

If he growls at you anyway, walk past at a greater distance, and toss chicken. Do not make eye contact with him. Continue to walk back and forth past the bed, tossing chicken each time you pass, until your dog is happily anticipating your pass-bys because he knows chicken is coming. Then gradually decrease the distance between you and the bed.

Assuming he’s still making happy faces as you pass, start making your approaches more direct, until you can walk right up to him and get a happy “Where’s my chicken?” response. You have eliminated his negative stress association to your approach, and replaced his aggression with eager anticipation, as he has come to realize that your approach makes chicken appear.

If he’s growling at someone else approaching you in the bed, again, arm yourself with chicken. Ask your partner to stand at a distance where the dog sees him but isn’t growling. That may mean totally out of the bedroom! Have your partner take one step toward you, and immediately start feeding chicken to your dog; don’t wait for a growl.

After tossing several bits of chicken, have your partner step back, and simultaneously stop feeding the chicken to your dog. Repeat this process until your dog looks happy -and looks to you for chicken -every time your partner takes one step forward. Then, with your partner at the same starting spot, have him take two steps forward. Repeat until your partner can approach the bed without any sign of tension from your dog. Then have your partner do the walk-by chicken-tossing procedure described above.

**• Consider using operant conditioning**

Another option is to use operant conditioning to teach your dog a new behavior when someone approaches the bed; the goal of changing his emotional response will follow his behavior change. This procedure has been dubbed “Constructional Aggression Treatment,” or CAT (see “[Modifying Aggressive Dog Behavior](http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/11_5/features/Modifying-Aggressive-Dog-Behavior_16029-1.html),” May 2008, and “[Constructional Aggression Treatment](http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/12_12/features/Constructional-Aggression-Treatment_16182-1.html),” December 2009). If you decide you want to try this approach, I urge you to work with someone who is skilled at reading dog body language and understands the CAT procedure; its success depends on the observer’s ability to identify very small changes in your dog’s body language.

In this process, you move toward your dog on the bed. As soon as you see any small sign of tension in your dog, stop and just stand still. Wait there until you see any small sign of relaxation, then move away. As you repeat the procedure, your dog learns that being relaxed makes you go away, so he becomes more and more relaxed. As his behavior changes and he becomes deliberately relaxed, the change in his emotional response follows.

It can work, but it can be a little tricky to see the changes in your dog’s body language. You definitely need an accomplished helper for this one.

Meanwhile, what do you do when your dog, ensconced on your bed, growls at you or your bed partner? Calmly stop, stand still, wait until he relaxes a little, and then stop doing whatever it was that elicited the growl. If you were touching him, stop touching him, and make a mental note to start counter-conditioning him to love being touched. If you were approaching the bed, invite him off with his “Off!” cue to defuse the current situation, and then start putting together a management and behavior modification plan.

There’s absolutely nothing to be gained by aggressing back at your dog with verbal or physical punishment when he growls at you. That’s so important I’ll say it again: Do not punish your dog for growling. Punishment is likely to make his behavior worse, because your aggression will add to his stress. It’s your job, as the one with the bigger brain, to figure out how to remove the stress from the situation for him. (See “[The Gift of Growling](http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/8_10/features/15753-1.html),” WDJ October 2005.)

Night, night. Sleep tight. Don’t let the bed dogs bite.

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