

Leash Aggression/Reactivity

If your dog lunges, pulls toward or barks at other dogs on walks, you know how stressful and embarrassing it can be. Leash-reactive behavior has many components that must be considered.

Causes of leash aggression/reactivity

- Greeting on a leash is unnatural. When off-leash and in their own environment, dogs naturally greet from the side. They don't approach head-on and make hard eye contact unless a fight is about to start. When dogs meet on leash, they are typically forced to approach head-on and can't turn their bodies. Most dogs don't want to fight, so they display a number of behaviors designed to prevent this: barking, lunging, growling, anything to make the threat go away.
- Dogs feel trapped. If the owners let their dogs say hi, the problems can increase. Both dogs are trapped on leash and unable to increase the distance between each other. Owners often have their dogs on tight leashes in case anything happens, but tight leashes communicate tension to the dogs and further increase their stress. What happens is an explosion of barking as both dogs go from flight to fight. If this doesn't happen, owners might assume the dogs are fine because neither is barking or growling, but don't recognize signs of stress like pacing, panting, scratching, flattened ears, and low tails.
- Improper greeting. Letting your dog charge up to another dog, get in his face, bump him, and jump on him is extremely rude behavior among dogs, and is sometimes the result of insufficient dog-dog socialization past the young puppy stage. Adult dogs, while patient with puppy antics, will discipline the pup once he reaches five or six months old. The discipline is non-violent and usually takes the form of barks and growls. If a puppy never experiences these corrections, he may carry his inappropriate greetings right into adulthood. When an adult dog inappropriately greets another dog, the other dog will react, and the owner of the first is likely to criticize the other for his dog's aggression, unaware that his own dog was the aggressor.
- Improper correction. Many people correct their dog for any perceived display of aggression. Forcing your dog to sit or lie down in the approaching dog's path can be very dangerous for several reasons. First, your dog learns that other dogs (and potentially other people) make bad things happen. He is feeling stressed, can't escape because of the leash, and is then punished. Punishment (yelling, jerking the leash, grabbing the dog, saying "no") increases your dog's anxiety level and will make him try even harder to keep other dogs away. Correcting him for growling or barking at another dog can also punish the warning out of him and cause him to go from seeing a dog to biting with no warning (barking, growling) in between. When you correct your highly aroused dog it can also cause him to redirect his aggression onto you.

Preventing leash aggression

Work on getting your dog's attention before you go out. Say his name and reward him for looking at you. Start in a low-distraction environment (like your living room) and gradually move to busier areas, only continuing when you can get his attention no matter what. You are teaching him to look at you comfortably regardless of his environment.

- Start walking at a distance from any dogs. Wait until your dog notices them, and immediately get his attention and reward him. Don't wait for him to react. This will teach him to associate the presence of other dogs with good things. When he looks up at you for more, go closer, and repeat. If your dog barks and lunges at another dog, your training went too far too fast. Add more distance and repeat the previous step. Don't punish your dog for barking or you will undo all of your work so far.
- Manage your dog's environment. Keep him at a comfortable distance from other dogs and don't allow others to greet him or invade his space. Every negative experience will set your dog's

progress back. If you live in a very busy walking area, consider taking your dog where less dogs are present.

- Go around other dogs in an arc. If you find yourself approaching another dog head-on, go around him in an arc shape, rewarding your dog with treats. If the other dog starts to lunge and bark, keep your dog's attention and reward more often. Put away the treats as soon as the other dog has passed so that your dog will associate other dogs with good things.
- If your dog has harmed another person or dog, we recommend acclimating him to a basket muzzle for walks. This will keep everyone safe while you are working on the behavior. We also recommend seeking professional assistance. Email for more information on professional assistance

Changes you might notice

- High arousal: Working breeds, such as herding dogs or those traditionally bred for hunting or fighting, may exhibit high arousal in excitable environments like play groups, and arousal in any form can lead to aggressive behavior. Such dogs may tip from excited play to fighting, or team up with other dogs to torment a victim dog.
- Irritability: Dogs who previously enjoyed rowdy play might begin to exhibit irritable behavior instead, snarking at dogs who attempt to engage them in play. They might also gravitate more toward human contact in a play setting rather than engaging other dogs. This is particularly common among mature females.
- Reactivity in shy dogs: Timid dogs might develop reactive behavior, hiding from boisterous young dogs and snapping at them whenever they approach. In a playgroup setting, they may go from hiding under a chair to rushing other dogs, barking, and snapping, in an attempt to chase them away. If they learn this behavior is successful, it may become more entrenched as the dog ages further.
- Bullying: Confident dogs with rough-and-tumble play styles might bully more timid dogs. They will continue playing despite cut-off signals from the victim dog (flattened ears and tail, lowered body, lip-licking, frightened yipping) and may appear to enjoy such interactions.

How to handle these changes

Avoid overly-aroused play situations. It is the rare adolescent dog who can remain calm and play appropriately when surrounded by other young, excited dogs. If your dog plays too roughly in these situations, remove him: choose quieter, less stressful venues for him. Visit the dog park when fewer dogs are present, making sure that at least some of them are mature adults. Well-socialized adult dogs are valuable park-mates for “teen” dogs, as they can teach them appropriate behavior without causing harm.

- Reinforce calm behavior. If you and your dog are approaching a dog park or playgroup and your dog begins barking excitedly, turn around and walk him away. Leave the building or return to your car and wait until your dog is calm again. If he simply cannot calm down, take him home. This may seem mean, but allowing him to rehearse overexcited behavior will not do him any favors!
- Continue introducing your adolescent to well-behaved adult dogs. “Well behaved” means the dog interacts well with young dogs but will interrupt inappropriate/rough behavior. Adult dogs typically use eye contact and tall, still postures to discourage unwanted contact. Interruptions normally consist of a quick, deep sound (sometimes called a “snark”), not a confrontation lasting several seconds. If the adult dog pursues the adolescent, this is inappropriate and must be interrupted.
- Allow your dog to rehearse only desirable behavior. Remember that any behavior will strengthen with practice so don't let them rehearse the wrong behavior. Are visits to the dog park teaching your dog to chase and bully every dog he sees? Is allowing your dog in the yard unsupervised allowing him to bark and lunge at dogs and people passing by? Don't be afraid to choose new activities for your dog if his current ones are reinforcing bad habits.
- Teach your dog to calm himself down. Put your dog on a leash while you watch TV and ignore him. If he climbs in your lap, gently move him away from you with the leash. If he barks, ignore him. Wait

until he settles quietly on the floor, then quietly praise him. If he jumps up again, start over. Practicing this “settle” exercise regularly will teach your dog that calm behavior is the way to get your attention.