

Leash Aggression in Dogs
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When interviewing clients to create behavioral profiles of their dogs, one key question I always ask is, “Do you enjoy walking your dog?” I know from experience that people will be more successful in achieving their training goals if they walk with their dogs for at least 30 minutes -- preferably longer – most days.

A common obstacle for many clients, beyond their general busyness and the deterrent effect of inclement weather, is leash aggression. This is the term trainers use to describe generally well-behaved friendly dogs who, when on-leash and walking with their owners, behave aggressively toward other dogs. These leash-aggressive dogs can switch from calm to Cujo in an instant. Their lunging, snarling, barking displays are often bluffs; leash-aggressive dogs rarely follow through with an injurious bite. But the owner’s resulting embarrassment is usually unpleasant enough to limit any future walks.

Canine Road Rage

To understand what’s fueling your dog’s leash aggression, consider this formula: agitation + frustration = rage. Remember the last time you were driving in heavy traffic, late for an appointment, and another driver pulled into the intersection ahead of you when there was no room for his car? The resulting gridlock blocked your ability to go forward when the light turned green. Despite your good manners and “Peace” bumper sticker, you may have resorted to cursing and less-than-gracious gestures. The agitation you felt from rushing around amid the chaos of hectic traffic was compounded by the frustration of not being able to move. The result might have been rage, seemingly out-of-proportion to the situation and out-of-character for you.

Dogs walking on-leash with their owners also can experience this combination of agitation and frustration. The general novelty of the smells and sounds in the area can cause excitement and some nervousness, but often the sight of another dog is the most salient trigger. The appearance of another member of their species can create intense curiosity and a strong desire to greet. But dogs who rarely get to meet and interact with a variety of other dogs may have underdeveloped social skills. These inexperienced dogs lack behavioral subtlety; they’ve never had the play opportunities necessary to develop nonchalance in novel social interactions. So, in their excitement to get close to the other dog, they lunge to the end of the leash, and feel sudden frustration. They can’t get where they want to go. The excitement of seeing another dog + the barrier frustration of the restraining leash = the canine version of road rage.

Notice that this formula hints at options for decreasing your dog’s rage. You can lower your dog’s level of arousal or her frustration, or both.

Turning the Corner on Road Rage

The amount of arousal a dog experiences in response to the sight of a novel dog often can be lessened by ongoing remedial off-leash socialization. Providing opportunities for leash-aggressive dogs to interact off-leash with a variety of dogs on a regular basis can help defuse their “WOW, WOW, WOW—it’s another dog !!!” reaction on walks. Dog trainers and

experienced dog daycare providers can usually provide suggestions for safe remedial socialization. This is usually a simplified version of the sort of off-leash play group you'd find at a dog park or dog daycare; it consists of a few confident friendly adult dogs, the inexperienced newcomer and constant human supervision.

You can short-circuit the rage of leash aggression typically by removing the frustration, that is, by dropping your dog's leash. Without that barrier to effective canine body language, most dogs can negotiate greeting another dog using calming signals and other species-specific movements that help avoid fights. Please note that this is not treatment advice! Never drop your dog's leash to avoid an aggressive display unless you are certain the owner of the other dog approves.

A safer option for removing a leash-aggressive dog's frustration is to ensure that the leash does not tighten. Here's a simple exercise to practice. First, make sure that your dog is securely attached to your leash. Use a leather or fabric 4'- or 6'-foot-long leash rather than a retractable leash.

Next find a bench to sit on or a place to stand where dogs are likely to pass by, on-leash with their owners, about 25 feet away. (Adjust this distance depending on the sensitivity of your dog.) Urban walking paths and the parking lots of veterinary clinics and doggie daycares are good options. As soon as you're certain your dog has noticed the other dog, grab several delicious meaty treats out of your pocket or bait bag and generously feed your dog. Stop feeding as soon as the other dog is out of sight or far enough away that your dog is no longer concerned. Do this for 20 – 30 minutes, several times a week. Every time your dog looks at another dog, become an automatic treat dispenser. Turn off the flow of food when the other dog is gone.

Within a few weeks, this exercise will create a new response in your dog. The sight of another dog will cause him to turn to you in expectation of treats rather than lunge to the end of the leash. Without the resulting frustration and explosive barking, your dog actually may be able to hear and respond to your cue to "Sit" or "Heel."

Nearly every week for the past year, I've encountered an older woman walking her Keeshond on the waterfront trail near my home. Every time this fluffy dog noticed my dogs walking with me, he growled and lunged. In response, the woman would yell and repeatedly jerk his leash. Simultaneously, I would feed my own leash-aggressive foxhound and move her to the side of the trail. Imagine my amazement when I passed her on the trail last week and watched the keeshond enthusiastically wagging his tail while gazing at his owner. The woman called out to me, "I finally figured I should try what you'd been doing all along. Now I just feed him when he sees another dog – and look what happens!"

Kathy Sdao is an Associate Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist who has spent the past two decades as a full-time animal trainer. She trained dolphins at a research lab at the University of Hawaii and for the US Navy, and she was a marine mammal trainer at a zoo in Tacoma, Washington. In 1998, Kathy opened Bright Spot Dog Training to provide behavior-modification services for pet owners. She teaches workshops for dog trainers across the country.