

Leash Aggression

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Imagine you are walking down the street with your dog. Another dog and owner comes toward you. You start to pull your dog closer, when, all of a sudden, your dog lunges at the dog and owner, making sounds that roughly translate into "I'm going to kill you!" How do you react?

Do you yank on the dog's leash? Do you yell "NO!"? Do you pet your dog or hold him to try to calm him down? If you do any of these things, you're doing the doggie equivalent of saying "Good dog, do that again!" Now the next time your dog faces a similar situation, the result will be the same.

So what just happened?

Dogs are highly social, to the point of compulsion. When dogs spot another dog on the street, they want to approach and investigate. When they try to "go say hi" they hit the end of the leash and get frustrated. That frustration translates into increased excitement and agitation – sometimes lunging at the end of the leash, barking, growling or snapping at the other dog. This behavior scares the owner, who in turn may yank off the dog's leash, start tensing up before encounters, deliberately avoid other people and dogs on walks or even punish the dog.

Understandably, the owner begins to anticipate any situation that might trigger this behavior. Spotting an approaching dog or person before the dog does, the owner tightens up on the leash so he can control the dog better, stiffens his own body posture and holds his breath. The dog notices the change in the leash tension, the owner's body posture and breathing, and begins looking to see what has the owner so worried, and once he spots it, begins his aggressive behavior.

This teaches your dog that when he sees other people or dogs on walks, he will feel frustrated, feel his owner's tension and associate that with the upcoming punishment.

What can you do to solve the problem? Here's the basics:

Train! Take the time to teach your dog *self control* and basic obedience commands which you can reinforce, and praise his good behavior.

Be alert to the earliest signs. No dog spends his entire life in an aggressive state. Learn what body language your dog exhibits when he is calm and relaxed, and what changes occur as he moves into a more aggressive mood. Watch for changes in ears, head and neck carriage, eye

shape and expression, mouth and whisker changes, tail carriage and overall posture. Intervention at the first sign of a problem is more successful than trying to deal with the full blown aggression.

Redirect the dog's attention. By giving a command he knows in a cheerful, upbeat tone, you can redirect the dog's attention back to working with you. If possible, change direction and move away from the situation - the dog cannot walk briskly with you and be aggressive at the same time.

Change the body posture, change the emotional state. Body language is nothing more than an external expression of an internal state. It is possible to change an emotional state by changing body posture and vice versa. This is why the advice to "Stand up straight, smile and you'll feel better" actually works! In the case of aggression, imagine how hard it would be to be angry if you were sitting in a comfortable chair with your face and head relaxed.

With a dog, you can physically change the body posture, and thus shift the emotional state, by simply asking the dog to sit (a neutral, non-aggressive position) and using your hands to stroke ears, mouth, head and hackles back to a more relaxed position. This is not petting, and you are not trying to reassure the dog. Concentrate on changing the body posture using firm strokes of your hands at the same time you insist the dog sit quietly with no tension on the leash. This very simple technique is amazingly effective.

Be aware of your breathing and body posture. Since we tend to hold our breath and thus tense our muscles when nervous (facts that do not escape the dog), it is important to breathe in a more normal fashion. The easiest way is to either sing or tell the dog a fairy tale, such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears. While this sounds silly, the very silliness keeps you calm and relaxed. How uptight can you get talking about a blonde and three bears in the woods?

Keep the leash loose. Remember tension on the leash *encourages* aggressive behavior. Put the dog under a command, like "sit", using the leash if needed to help him, but then immediately loosen all tension on the leash. This does NOT mean to give the dog the full freedom of his leash - keep your hand on the leash in such a way so that if needed you can quickly control him, but do not have any tension on the leash. If the dog breaks position, quietly remind him what he was asked to do, and reposition him.

Learn the difference between aggression and an appropriate response to rudeness. Far too many dogs are labeled aggressive when in fact they are responding in a perfectly appropriate canine fashion to rudeness. This usually occurs with others dogs whose owners allow them to be very rude because they believe that their dog is simply saying "hello" to

your dog. What is really happening is a canine version of a complete stranger rushing up to you and hugging & kissing you! If you verbally snapped at such a person and pushed him away, you would be well within your rights, and not considered aggressive. Don't let your dog be rude, and try to protect him from well meaning but uninformed owners who allow their dogs to be rude.

Shouting doesn't equal murder! Very few canine arguments result in any serious injuries. Though it is scary when dogs snap, growl and bark, remember that dog behavior is mostly posturing and threats designed to avoid real conflict. Just as you may raise your voice when upset to warn someone that you are angry, this does not mean you will escalate to real violence. Your dog uses his body language and vocalizations in the same way. Should a physical conflict arise, most dogs have bite inhibition and rarely inflict any serious damage. Knowing this allows you to stay calmer, and not imagine the worst!