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2024

CHARLESTON ANIMAL SOCIETY DOG RESOURCES

DOGS WHO ARE REACTIVE ON A LEASH

Many dogs lunge and bark at other dogs when on-leash, a behavior that trainers call “leash reactivity.” There are a number of reasons why dogs develop this problem. Some fear or dislike other dogs because of a bad experience with another dog in the past or because they weren’t well socialized to other dogs during puppyhood. For these dogs, barking and lunging on-leash serves a purpose—it keeps approaching dogs away. Other leash-reactive dogs like members of their own species a great deal. In fact, they enjoy playing and greeting so much that they become intensely frustrated when they’re restrained.

Living with a leash-reactive dog can be quite embarrassing, especially if you live in the city and can only exercise your dog by taking him on leashed walks. It can also be frustrating if your dog is consistently friendly in other situations. Some dogs only react poorly to other dogs when they’re on-leash—a phenomenon that baffles their pet parents! To avoid embarrassment and frustration, you may take your dog on shorter walks, perhaps at times when you know other dogs won’t be around. Unfortunately, a lack of exercise and exposure to other dogs can fuel a dog’s agitation, making him more anxious and even less sociable.

What Makes Dogs Reactive?

Watching how dogs greet each other when off-leash in a dog park may help you understand why it’s so much harder for them to interact on-leash. Unrestrained, sociable dogs usually approach each other in an arc, coming together gradually, wagging, soft-eyed and displaying other signs of friendly interest. They circle and sniff each other’s faces and then hindquarters before deciding whether to move on or play together. You’ll also notice that the dog who forgoes this greeting ritual and instead barges straight up to other dogs is the one who tends to get into arguments or fights.

Contrast this scenario with two dogs meeting on a sidewalk. These dogs are forced to approach head-on, so they’re more likely to make direct eye contact with each other. These are very threatening gestures in dog body language. Both dogs are probably pulling hard toward one another, with leashes tight. The strangling sensation of tightening collars adds to the dogs’ tension. As the people walking the dogs become more apprehensive, they may start jerking the leashes and muttering things like “Be NICE!” This likely confirms to the dogs that a threatening situation is at hand. Is it any wonder that there’s often an explosion when these two frustrated dogs finally meet?

Managing the Leash-Reactive Dog

Avoiding situations that might upset or excite your dog is a perfectly reasonable way to cope with leash reactivity, especially if you live in a suburban or rural area where you don’t have to encounter other dogs very often. The tips below can help you keep your dog calm during walks, reduce your own stress level and prevent your dog from practicing unwanted behavior. The more he practices lunging and barking, the better he’ll get at it!

- Many people are happy being in the “midnight walk club” and choose simply to avoid other dogs whenever possible by walking at off-peak hours





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- Many people are happy being in the “midnight walk club” and choose simply to avoid other dogs whenever possible by walking at off-peak hours.
- If you have a small dog who doesn’t mind being picked up, manage reactive behavior by picking him up and tossing a light jacket or towel over his face so that he can’t see approaching dogs.
- If you have a larger dog, you can move between parked cars, cross the road or even do a u-turn to get out of the way when another dog approaches.
- Try products that will obscure your dog’s vision, such as Premier’s Calming Cap™, available at www.premier.com, and Doggles® dog sunglasses, available at www.doggles.com. By making it harder to see other dogs, these products may reduce a reactive dog’s responses significantly. Your dog can also wear them or ride in a covered crate during car rides if he barks at things he sees out the window. Allowing him to lunge and bark from the car may fuel his reactivity.
- A head halter, such as the Gentle Leader® Headcollar or the Halti® Headcollar, is ideal for managing leash-reactive dogs. Just wearing one is enough to calm some reactive dogs. (Please see our articles on Walking Equipment for Your Dog and Introducing Your Dog to a Head Halter for more information about this tool.) Another great thing about head halters is that they allow you to gently redirect your dog’s gaze so that he can’t stare at other dogs. If a dog has been staring at something for two seconds or more, he’s very likely deciding whether or not to lunge, growl or bark. If you interrupt a stare before your dog reacts, you have a much better chance of persuading him to do something more appropriate, such as sitting or looking at you.

Training the Leash-Reactive Dog

Although it’s fine to stick with simply managing your dog’s reactive behavior, you can make your dog’s life less stressful by working on changing how he feels about other dogs when he sees them on-leash. Try the following exercises to teach your dog that approaching dogs mean good things for him—not tension and anxiety.

Other Dogs Make Great Things Happen

This technique involves repeatedly associating a small amount of something that your dog doesn’t like with a much larger amount of something he loves. With time and repetition, your dog will react with happy anticipation when he sees the thing that used to upset him. Please see our article on Desensitization and Counterconditioning if you’d like to know more about how this effective training technique works.

Before you get started, recruit a friend with a sociable or neutral dog who can help you with the first few training sessions. You’ll also need to cut some tasty treats into pea-sized pieces. Use something really exciting that your dog doesn’t usually get, like bits of cheese, chicken, hot dog or liver.

- In advance, determine your dog’s threshold—the distance at which he first starts to notice other dogs but doesn’t growl, bark or lunge at them. If your dog’s threshold is 40 feet, start with your friend and her dog about 50 feet away. Have the neutral dog appear for a few moments, perhaps between two parked cars. As soon as your dog notices the





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other dog but before he has a chance to bark, start feeding him treat after treat very quickly, 10 to 20 in a row, praising him enthusiastically the whole time. After about five seconds, your helper should lead her dog out of sight again. As soon as the helper dog disappears, stop giving your dog treats. Don't talk to him, and don't pet him. In fact, don't even look at him. Good things only happen when he sees other dogs.

- Have your friend lead the neutral dog into and out of sight over and over, waiting a few minutes between sightings. Eventually your dog will start to realize that the appearance of the other dog makes the treats and praise flow, and the dog's disappearance stops their delivery. You'll know that you're making progress when your dog sees the helper dog appear and then immediately looks to you, wagging in cheerful anticipation of his treats.
- The next step is to gradually move the neutral dog closer to yours. You can start walking your dog around as well, slowly decreasing the distance between the two dogs until they're able to pass on the sidewalk. If your dog is extremely reactive, you'll progress only a few steps at a time.

Some dogs who love food and become only mildly frustrated around other dogs may develop a happy response to them in just a session or two. However, most dogs need many training sessions over a period of days or weeks to achieve a permanent behavior change, so be patient. As you do the exercises above, it's best to progress more gradually than you think you should. There's no disadvantage to overtraining your dog's happy response to another dog—but you do risk setbacks every time you push your dog too far and he reacts aggressively. The trick to this technique is exposing your dog to just a little of something not-so-nice (seeing another dog) and then giving him a lot of something he really loves (treats or play).

If you don't have a friend with a neutral dog, you can do the exercises above by taking your dog to a popular dog walking path for training. (Just be sure to choose a place where you know other dogs will be on-leash and unable to run up to him.) Remember to stand as far away from the path as necessary to keep your dog from reacting to other dogs he sees. Over a period of days or weeks, you can gradually move closer, step by step, until your dog is able to walk right past other dogs on the path.

A Head Halter Can Help

If your dog is extremely reactive, or if he seems unable to take his eyes off of another dog no matter how far away he is, it may help to use a head halter during both training sessions and regular walks. Doing so can help you more effectively control your dog, and it will enable you to deliver a consequence if your dog chooses to lunge and bark.

First you'll need to accustom your dog to wearing a head halter. Please see our article on Walking Equipment for Your Dog for more information about the various halters available and our article on Introducing Your Dog to a Head Halter to learn how to teach your dog to wear one.

A head halter for dogs looks a lot like a horse's halter, and it gives you the same kind of control by allowing you to direct your dog's motion by turning his head. This feature can greatly reduce pulling and lunging. Additional benefits include the following:





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- You can easily break your dog's gaze if he's staring at another dog.
- If you gently pull the leash straight up while your dog is wearing a head halter, you'll be able to close his mouth and prevent him from biting another dog or redirecting his aggression toward you.
- Head halters aren't muzzles. A halter won't keep your dog's mouth closed or prevent him from biting unless you pull up on the leash. However, a halter does look a little like a muzzle, so it might deter people from allowing their dogs to run up to yours.

Sit and Pay Attention

After helping your dog get used to wearing a head halter, you can start using it to teach him what to do when he sees other dogs. The following exercise focuses on two main goals:

- Teach your dog that seeing other dogs means he's going to get delicious treats Changing the way your dog feels, as described above, will go a long way in changing his behavior.
- Give him something to do instead of reacting inappropriately It's impossible for your dog to sit and look at you and lunge and bark at other dogs. By teaching your dog to perform these incompatible behaviors, you can replace his bad reaction with more appropriate behavior.

Practice the exercises outlined in the section called "Other Dogs Make Great Things Happen." But instead of just giving your dog treats when the other dog appears, say your dog's name to get him to look at you. Speak in an upbeat voice, and make encouraging noises, if necessary. If he looks at you, say "Good!" Then ask him to sit. When he complies, praise him and start feeding him treats, one after another, until the other dog disappears.

If your dog doesn't look at you when you say his name or if he lunges and barks when the other dog appears, use the halter to redirect his gaze. Simply pull straight up on the leash, which will turn his head away from the other dog. Continue to apply gentle upward pressure until your dog turns his eyes away from the other dog and looks at you instead. The instant he does, loosen the leash and give him 10 to 20 treats in rapid succession. If you find yourself having to redirect your dog's gaze more than half of the time, the neutral dog is probably too close to yours. Move a little further away and try again.

Again, there is no disadvantage to progressing slowly. Focus on building a truly happy, wagging response to the sight of the other dog before taking a step closer to her. It will likely take a number of days or weeks of work, but in the end you'll be able to enjoy much calmer walks for the rest of your dog's life.

Additional Recommendations

- Even after you've completed your training and you're able to walk your dog past other dogs without incident, it's a good idea to carry treats on walks and occasionally reward your dog for appropriate behavior. Doing this will ensure that he'll remember how great it is to encounter other dogs, even if he's on-leash.
- Some dogs are reactive on-leash when they see humans or other animals, like cats or squirrels. Although the techniques described above are written for dogs who react poorly to the sight of other dogs, they can be used to work with any dog who lunges and barks at people or other animals.





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- Please see our article on Canine Body Language for more information about how your dog communicates. Learning what dogs look like when they're feeling upset, aggressive or afraid can help you avoid potentially problematic situations.
- If you've tried all the recommendations above but your dog is still reactive on-leash, please contact a professional for guidance. A qualified animal behavior expert may be able to offer additional treatment strategies. It's also important to seek professional help if your dog has bitten a person or another animal. An experienced, knowledgeable behaviorist can show you how to change or manage your dog's behavior safely.
- If possible, contact a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB). These professionals are best equipped to treat problems involving fear and aggression. If you can't find a behaviorist, you can seek help from a Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT), but be sure that the trainer has education and extensive experience in treating fear and aggression. This kind of expertise isn't required for CPDT certification. Please see our article on Finding Professional Help to locate a behaviorist or CPDT in your area.

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