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## **Leash Aggression in Dogs (dogs who aggress towards other dogs while on leash)**

I get more calls about leash aggression than any other behavior problem. Leash aggressive dogs often bark, growl, snap, or lunge at other dogs when they are on their leash. The same dog can be well behaved around other dogs when they are off leash. Leash aggression can spoil a walk for the owner, and the dogs aren't enjoying themselves either. Many owners are quite perplexed about why their dog is leash aggressive, but it is a problem that can be quickly diagnosed and treated with the help of an experienced trainer. Below are the causes of leash aggression.

**Genetics.** Shyness (i.e., being cautious, distrustful, and wary) is a trait that can help with survival in the wild, so it can become a very deeply rooted, hardwired trait in animals, including our domestic dogs. Some characteristics like sensitivity, reactivity, excitability, high prey drive, and protectiveness are also heightened by selective dog breeding, though leash aggression does not seem to be a breed-specific issue.

**Lack of Socialization.** We need to socialize our dogs early and expose them to lots of new things to help them get over their shyness and this includes socialization around other dogs. If puppies don't get early exposure to other dogs, they may grow up to be fearful of strange dogs.

**Traumatic Event.** A traumatic experience such as being attacked by another dog may lead to your dog becoming fearful of all strange dogs.

**Series of Negative Experiences.** Something as simple as being repeatedly barked at while on a walk can cause dogs to feel they have to defend themselves around strange dogs. Almost any series of negative events can establish a learned behavior in your dog if there are no positive experiences with other dogs that are mixed in.

**Feeling Trapped.** I believe this is the most common problem. Dogs have a hard time effectively communicating to one another while on leash. Sometimes the dogs communicate just fine, but we owners don't handle the introductions properly. If another dog sends signals to get away, sometimes our dog gets the message, but we create problems by saying "its okay" and leading our dog by their leash toward the uninvited introduction. As a result, our dog can't maintain the distance demanded by the other dog, which causes tension and frustration in our dog. Many dogs are totally fine until they hit the end of the leash. If we punish the behavior when they are acting out of fear, it can make the behavior worse.

**Leash Frustration.** This situation often starts when dogs are very eager to meet each other. If we don't allow willing dogs to meet, we frustrate them, and sometimes even punish them for being too insistent. This can get them even more excited, and this combination of high arousal and frustration can easily tip over into aggression.

**The Bully Dog.** Some dogs just like to be a bully to other dogs, on or off leash. They get a charge out of lunging and aggressing towards other dogs.

**It most often is a combination of the above.** My Australian Shepherd recently developed leash aggression at age 7. I believe it was a series of the above causes; genetics, lack of early socialization (I got her as an adult), a series of negative events not being interspersed with enough good experiences, and feeling trapped on a leash.

### **How do we resolve leash aggression?**

Scientific trainers use counter conditioning, desensitization and working our dogs under threshold. These same techniques can work for anything your dog fears, such as people, bicycles, vet/groomer visits, car rides, vacuum cleaners, baths, nail trims, etc.

**Counter conditioning** is teaching the dog that whatever used to bring stress and fear now brings good things. Usually the “good thing” is food, but we can also use toys and praise or a combo of all three. We change their attitude from “Oh no, here comes a dog!” to “Oh boy, here comes a dog!!” As a trainer, I also focus on counter conditioning the owner. We need to change the owner’s view of a dog approaching because the owners stress, fear, frustration, and anger goes right down the leash.

**Desensitization** is a process of slowly closing the distance. If your dog is reacting to other dogs 20 ft away, we start at 25 feet away. We start at a distance where we have success. After we have success at that distance we *slowly* move closer. If we move too quickly we are sensitizing the dog, not desensitizing. Moving too quickly will set the training back.

**Threshold** is that tipping point where your dog can no longer handle it. They are doing fine but then all of the sudden they have an outburst. Scientific trainers try to work just under threshold. Working just under threshold establishes a challenge for your dog that isn’t too easy (nothing in life is free), but isn’t too difficult either (we set them up to succeed). We work at a level where the dog is just slightly uncomfortable but can relax enough to focus on us, all the while building their confidence and showing them they can do it. We are teaching our dogs the behavior we want to see on walks around other dogs, and rewarding them for that behavior. If you work under threshold, even early on in the training process, you will be able to take a walk without your dog reacting, even when passing by many dogs.

**Looking for triggers** is part of the treatment for dog aggression. Triggers are things or situations that can set off leash aggression in your dog. Triggers can run the gamut – they can be certain types of dogs, signals the other dogs send out, how you hold the leash, your emotional state, particular locations, or any combination. One common trigger is eye contact between dogs. Almost always, the more eye contact another dog gives, the more threatened they feel. My Australian Shepherd reacts most strongly to a combination of triggers -- dogs that are light in color and give eye contact. You can construct theories as to why your dog reacts to a particular trigger, but the most important thing is to identify the trigger(s) so you don’t get caught off guard. When we are extra alert to our dog’s triggers, we set them up to succeed when that trigger appears on our walks.

**Reading dog body language** is very important. You want to be able to read their stress signals that indicate your dog is close to reaching its’ threshold, as well as their calming signals. Calming signals are signals dogs give out to diffuse stressful situations. Dog body language is fairly universal, but every dog has an individual “dialect.” For example, a tail going from neutral

to high may be a tipping point for one dog, but not another. Learning your own dog's body language, with a trainer's help, will help you identify his internal emotional state. Through their body language, dogs communicate to other dogs and to us. We need to learn how to "speak dog."

**Prior training will get faster results.** If your dog has been to a training class and has learned good attention skills and leash walking skills, you are ahead of the game. If not, these skills may have to be taught first before going through the behavior modification.

**About food** -- don't leave home without it. Even if you have reached a point where your dog is no longer reacting 99.9 % of the time, you may encounter a reactive dog just like yours used to be, and that may be enough to trigger your dog. You may encounter a loose dog that is aggressive and food will get their focus back on you if they feel trapped or afraid. In the beginning of your training you will be using high value food like cheese, hot dogs, or cut up chicken (and a lot of it!). When your dog gets better, you just pop a few pieces of kibble in your pocket just in case.

**Getting results** -- this may seem like a lot to absorb and difficult to administer but once shown correctly, it is easy to train, and fun to do since we are teaching our dog proper behavior through games. We can see improvement almost immediately so we stay motivated. An experienced trainer can usually identify your dog's triggers, teach you how to read your dog's body language, teach you how to stay under threshold, and coach you on what motivates and reinforces your dog, all in one session. After working with a trainer, results only happen when you continue to work with your dog. Almost all dogs can reach a point of passing other dogs on walks without reacting. Many can even meet and greet other dogs without reacting, and some even eventually learn how to play with other dogs.

You can walk your dog free of the stress, frustration and embarrassment. It will take some work but you can enjoy your walks and improve your dog's life by giving them high quality, stress-free exercise. A happy and well-exercised dog is a good dog.

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