



Golden Rule Training

Is it Leash Aggression or Leash Reactivity?

A reaction to the leash is fairly common, any dog that is normally calm, can turn into a lunging, snarling, growling canine at the sight of another dog on a walk. I have clients that had become members of the "Nightly Walking Club", changing their walking schedules to avoid other dogs.

Leash-reactive behavior can happen to any breed or background. This behavior appears in dogs purebred and mixed who were acquired as puppies from breeders and adopted from rescues. Most of these dogs are typically friendly and mild-mannered and are quite friendly to other dogs when off-leash. However, when they are on-leash and on a walk, they display aggressive behavior. This is why the behavior is more accurately referred to as leash-reactivity. The dog is reacting to something in the environment, and being attached to a leash does not stimulate aggressive behavior.

What Causes Leash Reactivity?

There can be many causes for leash-reactive behaviors, including lack of early socialization, a traumatic experience, or simply a lack of training. One common frustration for a dog is when he dog spots another dog, attempts to rush over to greet the dog, and smacks the end of the leash. The restraint of the leash turns their normal, excitement to meet another dog into frustration, which if it continues, can manifest as leash-reactive behavior.

When a dog is unsure about or fearful of other dogs he encounters on a walk, this is known as leash aggression. Being restrained or trapped by the leash, the reactive dog is forced to walk closer and closer toward the other dog; if he had a choice, he might have chosen to keep his distance. The barking, lunging and snarling are all signals to the other dog to go away and are typically a fear reaction.

From the dog's perspective, his reactive behavior is very effective. Because each time he does it, the other dog goes away. He doesn't realize that the other dog probably lives two blocks over and is on the way home. In the dog's mind, his behavior effectively prevented a serious conflict and that makes good sense.

Note: As some people believe, a lack of exercise is NOT a cause of on-leash frustration or aggression, it is situational.

It may seem logical to expose the reactive dog to other dogs and then try to train the dog not to lunge or bark. However, once a dog is reacting to another dog, the part of the

brain that processes the fight or flight impulse has kicked in, and it's too late. When this part of the brain is activated the brain can't process anything else, and survival is the only concern. Dog trainers refer to this as the dog being "over-threshold", or past the point the dog can tolerate, hence the reaction.

It is critical that any training for reactivity take place when the dog is "under-threshold", or calm and the problem behavior has not yet started. Often this means starting the training when no dogs are present, and then presenting a dog from a distance at which the dog does not react. That distance is gradually decreased while the dog's tolerance to the presence of other dogs is increased and the dog is rewarded (food treat or praise) for good behavior. This process is also known as "desensitizing."

This is where working with a professional trainer is so important. In addition to teaching you the obedience skills your dog will need, a trainer will teach you how to read your dog's body language so you can tell when your dog is about to react and keep him below that level. A trainer can also teach you what to do if you accidentally go too far and your dog starts reacting.

IMPORTANT: NEVER PUNISH YOUR DOG FOR A REACTION!

Never punish your dog for his reaction! Punishment can vary from verbal reprimands to physical corrections; this not only fails to improve the leash-reactive behavior, but makes it worse! The dog's already negative association to strange dogs is now enhanced by the punishment. In addition, an overly-friendly leash-frustrated dog can form a negative association to other dogs, and neither behavior is a positive result.

Punishment sometimes appears to work, because it suppresses the behavior in the moment. However, most dog owners find that the dog renews the behavior at each walk and it gradually increases the frequency and intensity of the behavior. The rule of effective punishment is that it completely stops the behavior after 2-3 trials. If the behavior keeps recurring, the punishment is not working! Temporary containment of behavior is not changed behavior!

Solutions

If you are not training your dog and do not want to "desensitize" him to any reaction, an option is to turn and walk in the other direction when you encounter a dog. This must be done before your dog begins any reaction. As the leader, you have now taken the lead, increased the distance between your dog and the other dog, and kept your dog safe.

If you are interested in training your dog and working on less of a reaction, the most effective way is the gradual process of desensitization and counter-conditioning (for detailed information see the Golden Rule Library for more information on Desensitization).

1. Desensitization is this process of exposing the dog to other dogs, or trigger, at a distance where the dog is "under-threshold" or not reactive (non-threatened). The

dog is then taught an alternate, more acceptable behavior, such as focusing on the owner. This is very gradual and requires patience; the distance between the reactive dog and the strange dog becomes less at each stage, and the new, calm behavior is practiced and rewarded. When the dog is calm and accepting of his environment, he receives a treat or reward. This puts the owner in control of the situation rather than reacting to the dog, which naturally makes the dog calm.

You may choose to work individually with a trainer as it is the best approach for this type of behavior.

While you are working on changing the behavior, make sure to:

2. Be aware of your state of mind: do a self-check, are you tense? Are YOU the one making the leash tight? If so, **relax!** Your dog can sense if you are nervous, or anxious which can cause more of a reaction, which in turn can make the situation worse. Hold the leash firmly without pulling on it and remember to breath slowly and stay calm.
3. Learn to recognize your dog's body language when he is tense. If you notice stiffening, an erect head and tail, lip curling, or raised hackles he is at his threshold. Don't wait for it to escalate, move to the other side of the street or turn around and go the other way. You are in control of the walk! .
4. Another option is to distract (known as "redirecting") your dog by moving him away from whatever is making him tense; play with a toy, or give him some treats. Ask him to "watch-me", or focus on you (distract him by focusing on more interesting things).

Remember, if another dog does approach your dog on a tight leash, breathing hard, dragging his owner behind him, and is in your dog's face or placed a paw up on his back DO NOT JERK ONN THE LEASH and correct your dog! This sends the wrong message to him for trying to protect himself; instead, move away from the nuisance quickly and calmly. The less you react, the less your dog will react.

Will a Group Obedience Class Help?

While group classes can sometimes be a realistic goal for owners of leash-reactive dogs to work towards, they do not present an effective solution for the behavior, itself. Leash-reactive behavior can often escalate in this environment, especially if there are other leash-reactive dogs in the class. This environment only serves to reinforce the dog's belief that other dogs present a threat.

Ask the trainer for a private session to work on the desensitization process first, and then based on the progress, enroll the dog in a beginning obedience class.

Sources:

Deana Case, eHow User http://www.ehow.com/how_2142506_prevent-leash-aggression.html#ixzz1Q9oVEK39

4PawsUniversity