

Help... My Dog is Crazy on Leash!

By Kari Bastyr

Leash aggression and leash reactivity are a growing phenomenon that people are experiencing with their dogs at an alarming rate. With the increase in humans' working hours, decrease in time to exercise our dogs, and the increase in "second-hand" dogs, I am seeing many more cases of this behavior. Very frequently my clients call me and say, "My dog is the sweetest thing in the world, but when he is on leash at Wash Park, he becomes Cujo and it's scary!" It is true that most dogs are very well behaved at home, but have no idea how to behave in public, around other dogs or with an environment full of distractions.

Symptoms of leash aggression and reactivity include the following

- pulling
- lunging
- growling
- barking
- whining
- fixating
- screaming
- 'victim-searching'
- foaming
- snarling
- nipping
- biting

While it is extremely important to keep your dog on a leash while walking (it's the law!), it can create a less than

ideal reaction. Most owners make the mistake of letting dogs meet nose-to-nose, which is a huge mistake. Letting dogs meet nose-to-nose (with forced eye contact) is not a normal greeting ritual and if you add in the tension on the leash and the increased excitability, dogs can become anxious and act out because they don't have an escape route. The reactivity can even teach your dog that if he growls and snarls more, he gets more attention from you and the other dog "goes away" faster.

Most leash aggression is defensive and occurs when there is a fear-based issue and heightened adrenaline in the brain. Aggression and reactivity can also stem from underlying anxiety, which can be caused by several factors:

- insecurity
- multiple homes
- lack of leadership
- genetics
- under-socialization
- shelter/rescue situation
- improper socialization
- unclear expectations
- use of aversive control

These seemingly aggressive behaviors can also be protective, because the dog doesn't see the owner as a strong enough leader and therefore has the responsibility to protect his pack member. Some herding dogs can have increased leash frustration that can



Kari Bastyr, shown here with Jasper, is owner of Wag and Train in Denver.

turn into aggression. In my experience, many dogs who are aggressive on leash actually do very well off leash and even go to daycare. It's the leash and who is attached to the end that can make them aggressive or reactive.

The actual behavior is a symptom of underlying problems and physiological responses, which makes it harder to treat. The worst thing you can do is "correct" the aggression or frustration, because it will inevitably increase adrenaline and eventually the aggression. Punishment and correction can work initially, but will suppress the emotional drive and potentially make the aggression worse. It can also teach a dog that bad things happen when other dogs and people are around and is not an effective way to make a positive association.

The good news is that there is hope! Most leash aggression is manageable and behavior modification can decrease the reactivity and change the emotional response while teaching a new relaxed behavior. Treatment involves many factors, including leadership and relaxation training, then programming

the brain to not adrenalize as quickly, and eventually teaching an alternative response, which is most often a relaxed behavior. Once we accomplish this, we can teach the appropriate dog language and greeting behavior, while using calming signals and appeasement behaviors to create a new neuro-pathway in the brain. It can be very scientific, and involves much more than just "correcting" the actual behavior itself.

Unlike other types of behavior problems, aggression issues are best handled with the assistance of an experienced behavior professional who is educated and certified, and not just simply a dog trainer. Here are a few things you can do while you research your best training option:

1. Use a leather leash instead of a nylon or retractable leash.
2. Invest in a thick-nosed Gentle Leader head halter so you can control the direction of your dog's head and body. Be sure it fits correctly, too.
3. Bring treats on your walks and reward calm, relaxed behavior while your dog is watching you.
4. Do not slow down or stop if you see another dog — he will learn this is a cue to be "on alert."
5. Do not yell or become frustrated as your dog will feel even more need to protect you if you are not in control.
6. Practice being a good leader all the time, every day. Do not allow your dog to walk all over you!


7. Do not use choke chains, prong collars or shock for aggression.

Aversive training is a quick fix, but most often the suppressed aggressive behavior can come out in other ways. It is much more effective to focus on the physiological cause of the behavior and reprogram the dog's brain so they can learn a new behavior with positive rewards and associations. Most importantly, you must focus on teaching your dog what to do—instead of what not to do—in all areas of training and use only positive methods. 🐾

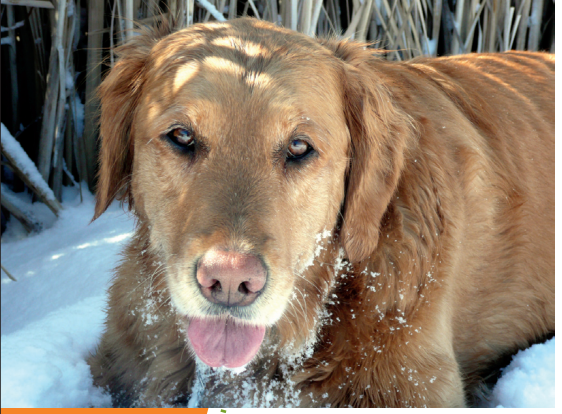
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