



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

# On Leash Reactivity in Dogs

**Are you embarrassed to take your dog out for a walk because he or she goes crazy every time you pass by another dog? You aren't alone! It's common to see dogs being walked on leash bark, growl, whine, or even lunge when they see unfamiliar dogs. Often, these same dogs are fine when playing off-leash around other dogs or can walk peacefully on leash with dogs they know.**

Dogs who display aggressive behavior when on leash may do so for a variety of reasons:

- they weren't properly socialized -- not enough time with other dogs during their first months
- they suffered a traumatic experience while on leash (i.e. attacked by an off-leash dog)
- some dogs act out due to frustration – they really want to meet or play with other dogs
- some dogs are simply unfriendly towards other dogs and may hurt them

Being on leash can complicate normal dog greeting rituals and also does not allow a fearful or anxious dog to get away from an uncomfortable situation. If your dog doesn't want to meet other dogs, it's best to respect what your dog is trying to communicate to you and not force a greeting.

## How to help a leash reactive dog

Leash reactive dogs can typically be helped by a combination of:

- Management
- Behavior Modification
- Remedial Socialization
- Avoiding punishment

Management and behavior modification work together to reduce leash reactivity. **Management** prevents situations or encounters where the dog will get excited or emotionally aroused and escalate to barking, lunging, and/or growling at other dogs. **Behavior modification** is the process of actually changing the dog's behavior and how it responds to dogs it doesn't know. When beginning behavior modification, management is critical because it is very important to make sure the dog doesn't continue to practice the unwanted types of behavior. For more information about changing your dog's

behavior (Behavior Modification), see the handout *Desensitization and Counterconditioning*. The process takes time and patience but it's worth it because you will be able to enjoy walking with your dog.

While it's frustrating, frightening and even embarrassing to have your dog bark, growl and lunge at other dogs while you are in public, it's important **not** to punish the dog. Examples of punishment include, yelling at the dog, jerking on a leash attached to a choke chain or prong collar, use of an electronic shock collar, the Alpha Roll (pinning a dog on its back) or hitting the dog. These actions do not solve the problem and can actually make the aggressive behavior worse. A dog who is punished may become more aggressive towards other dogs or can become aggressive towards people.

## Management Techniques

Managing a dog who reacts to other dogs while on leash requires the owner or dog walker to be prepared before going on walks.

- Get your dog used to wearing a head collar (Gentle Leader, Halti) or no pull harness (SENSE-ation, Premier Easy Walk Harness), and carrying a pouch filled with small treats the dog can't resist like cheese, sliced hot dogs, chicken, or meaty/fishy dog treats.
- Choose a route where you won't meet a lot of other dogs, especially off leash dogs.
- Avoid dog parks.
- Walk where you can make an emergency retreat or put distance between your dog and other dogs.
- When possible, keep your dog far enough away from other dogs so that she doesn't bark, lunge or growl. For example, your dog may be able to stay calm when there's another dog across the street. When you can't keep this distance, keep yourself between your dog and other dogs and walk quickly by while feeding your dog treats.
- Do not allow your dog to stare or make direct eye contact with another dog. In dog "language," this can be interpreted as a challenge.
- To keep your dog focused on you, teach him basic



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commands, including “watch.” Practice this on your walks when there are no dogs around. If you encounter another dog, maintain a safe distance and have your dog “watch” you. Continue walking while feeding treats in rapid succession and praising your dog. If you feel like a treat dispenser, you are doing it right! If your dog is focused on you, he can’t focus on the other dogs and become reactive. Feeding treats while your dog is calm will also help your dog develop positive associations about other dogs.

- If you find yourself confronted by an oncoming dog, use the “runaway” strategy. Call your dog, lure with a treat, make a U-turn and quickly but calmly walk away from the other dog. Feed treats as you are putting distance between your dog and the oncoming dog.
- If you are concerned your dog may be overly focused on another dog, get your dog’s attention by tossing a treat on the ground. If your dog is searching for treats, he can’t focus on the other dog!
- Don’t tense up on the leash. When you are tense, your dog senses or feels this and becomes tense.

**Very important:** if you’re concerned that your dog could potentially hurt another dog, have a behavior counselor fit your dog with a basket style muzzle. These muzzles allow the dog to breathe and take treats. Gradually, over several days at home, take the time to get your dog used to wearing the basket muzzle. Do not force the dog to wear the basket muzzle in public unless he is calm and happy wearing it.

### Additional Resources

- Peninsula Humane Society Behavior Department offers private behavior counseling. Call 650-340-7022 ext 667 to schedule a private consultation.
- Enroll in a special class for dogs that are reactive to other dogs. Please contact the PHS Behavior Helpline for referrals at 650-340-7022 ext 783.
- Books:
  - o Feisty Fido, Patricia McConnell and Karen B. London
  - o Help for Your Fearful Dog, Nicole Wilde
  - o Reactive Rover, Kim Moeller
- Television
  - o “It’s Me or the Dog” on Animal Planet, hosted by Victoria Stillwell

**For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.**