



Managing a leash-reactive dog

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If you have a dog that lunges/pulls toward/barks at other dogs on walks, you know how stressful and embarrassing it can be. In addition, you may be offered “advice” from well-meaning friends and relatives (who are not dog professionals) that only seem to make the matter worse. This kind of behavior has many components that must be considered:

1. When off-leash and in their own environment, dogs naturally greet from the side (in an “arc”) and sniff each other’s genital area. They don’t approach head-on and make hard eye contact unless a fight is about to start. They also don’t typically greet for more than a few seconds.
2. When our dogs meet on leash, they are typically forced to approach head-on (if on a path, for example) and unable to turn their bodies. Their forced body language -- and our own body language -- might indicate to the dogs that we want to fight. Most dogs *don’t* want to fight, so they display a number of behaviors designed to prevent this: barking, lunging, growling, anything to make the threat go away. We call these “distance-increasing behaviors.”
3. If the two people do decide to visit, or let the dogs “say hi,” the problems may increase. Both dogs are on leash: trapped, and unable to increase distance from each other. Often, the owners have their dogs on tight leashes, “in case anything happens.” Unfortunately, the tight leashes communicate tension to the dogs, further increasing their stress. What often happens is an explosion of barking as both dogs go from flight (which is impossible) to fight. If this doesn’t occur, both owners might assume the dogs are “fine” because neither is barking or growling: they may not recognize signs of stress like pacing, panting, scratching, flattened ears and low tails.
4. In addition, many owners do not recognize rude behavior in their “friendly” dogs. They allow their dog to charge up to another dog, get in his face, bump him and jump on him. This is *extremely* rude behavior among dogs, and is sometimes the result of insufficient dog-dog socialization past the young puppy stage. Adult dogs, while patient with puppy antics, will discipline the pup once he reaches 5-6 months: he is now sexually mature and must learn how to behave. This discipline is non-violent and usually takes the form of barks and growls. If a puppy never experiences this, he may carry his inappropriate greetings right into adulthood. When that happens, the other dog will react (“What are you doing? Get off me!”) and the owner of the first will likely lambaste the other for her dog’s “aggression,” unaware that her own dog was the aggressor.

5. Many people are advised to “correct” their dog for any perceived display of aggression. Some, in addition, force their dog to sit or lie down in the approaching dog’s path (while correcting) to “put him in his place.” **This can be very dangerous for several reasons.** First, Fido is learning that other dogs (and potentially other people) are bad news: Fido starts out feeling stressed, cannot escape because of the leash, and is then punished by his owner. **Remember that any punishment (yelling, jerking the leash, grabbing the dog, etc.) adds to Fido’s anxiety level: he perceives his owner’s tension, but not the reason for it.** Most likely, he will try even harder to keep other dogs away to avoid such trauma. Second, “correcting” a dog for growling or barking at another may punish the warning out of him: he may go from seeing the dog to biting with practically nothing in between. No need to explain why this can be a problem! Third, correcting a dog who is highly aroused may cause him to redirect his aggression onto the handler.

So, what to do? Here are some steps that can improve the quality of yours and Fido’s walks:

Note: Before attempting to modify leash reactive behavior it’s important to teach your dog to walk on a loose leash. This is not an intuitive behavior for dogs and it’s something people frequently overlook! Practice loose leash walking in areas without distractions until your dog has a good understanding of what’s expected. Then:

1. Work on getting his attention before you go out. This is really easy: simply say his name and reward him for looking at you. Start in a low-distraction environment (like your living room) and gradually move to busier areas, only continuing when you can get Fido’s attention no matter what. You are teaching him to look at you comfortably regardless of the environment.
2. Start at a distance from any dogs: wait until Fido notices them, and immediately get his attention and reward. Do not wait for him to react! You are teaching him to associate the presence of other dogs with something wonderful. When he looks up at you for more, go closer and repeat.
3. If he barks and lunges at the dogs, you went too far too fast. Add more distance and repeat. **DO NOT PUNISH FIDO FOR BARKING**, or you will undo all of your work thus far!
4. Manage Fido’s environment for his and everyone’s safety. Keep him at a comfortable distance from other dogs, don’t allow others to greet (at this time), and certainly don’t allow others to invade Fido’s space. Every negative experience will set your dog’s progress back, so don’t let it happen!
5. If you find yourself approaching another dog head-on, simply go around him in an “arc,” keeping your dog’s attention as usual. If the other dog starts to lunge and bark, keep Fido’s attention and reward more often. *As soon as the other dog goes away, so do the treats.* This will further his association of other dogs with wonderful things.