

Leash Aggression

Leash aggression (lunging and growling at other dogs while on a leash) is most often inadvertently trained in by owners or other people that have walked the dog. When the person walking the dog sees another dog and tightens the leash, that person's tension is often relayed to the dog. The dog growls, the person tightens the leash more and maybe yells at the dog. Over time, the dog becomes conditioned to get tense, as he makes the association between other dogs approaching and the dog walker's anxiety. So now the dog wants the other dog to stay away, and one of the ways he tries to accomplish this is by growling, barking and lunging.

Furthermore, if the dog is uncomfortable with another dog, tightening the leash excludes flight from his possible options and leaves him with fight as the major option. Tightening the leash also distorts the dog's body language and all but forces him to lean forward on his front feet – a posture that the other dog may perceive as somewhat threatening.

Obviously, keep the dog on leash for safety, but you (as the walker) have got to learn to control the dog without tightening the leash. By keeping the leash loose and acting calm, you may convince your dog to do the same! Think about using a head halter – this is a good time when one could come in handy.

Don't punish the dog for barking or growling at other dogs. The punishment may teach the dog "I don't like being around other dogs because I am punished whenever they show up, so I'll bark to keep them away." Instead, try to focus on making the dog enjoy the presence of other dogs by associating them with things he likes.

For leash aggression, the method of choice is reward-based training, and the best feedback is kibble (a tasty treat) and praise. Start by hand feeding the dog and getting him fixated on an object (like a Kong, squeaky toy, or food lure). This way, you can expose the dog to one dog at a time, at a safe distance and give him something to do, such as chewing a toy or eating treats. This will give the dog something to focus on and associate the presence of dogs with things he likes.

The technique here is to go outside and sit on a park bench. Whenever you see another dog you say, "oh, look, here comes a cookie dog." And as soon as the dog sees the other dog, you give him a treat. Even if the dog is tense and growling and one might say that you are rewarding the dog for growling and acting badly around other dogs, things will improve quickly. The dog cannot help but make the positive association between the approaching dog and the cookie and soon the dog will look forward to other dogs approaching. Any time the dog acts appropriately when another dog approaches, offer a reward. Be sure you give the dog enough space from the other dog to feel safe and comfortable. And watch for early signs of discomfort, such as yawning or excessive panting or activity. You don't want to push the dog too far too soon.

A variation of this would be to get very happy whenever another dog passes by. The dog cannot fail to make the association between the appearance of another dog and your positive change of mood. This is important because it is the dog walker's change in mood that has caused most of the problem.

Remember that it may take a bit of time for the dog to learn that having dogs around while on leash is a good thing (because he has learned the opposite). These situations require as much compassion and patience as when dealing with human fears and phobias.

While working with a leash aggressive dog, you will need to walk this dog by himself so you can concentrate all your efforts to help the dog.