

Both Ends of the Leash

A Peaceful Walk in the Park Strategies for defusing tense encounters while walking a dog-reactive dog

Patricia B. McConnell

“It’s okay!” she waves, her two Golden Retrievers racing toward your dog like cheerful, caramel-colored tsunamis. “My dogs LOVE other dogs,” she gushes, while your mouth goes dry and your heart stops, then resumes pounding so hard you think it might thump out of your chest. It doesn’t matter if the approaching dog loves other dogs—not if your dog barks and lunges every time she sees something with four feet. It’s your dog who is the problem, and there you are, trying to be responsible, keeping your dog leashed and under control, while those around you let their dogs run free and turn your relaxing walk into a stress test.

Has this ever happened to you? If so, you’re not alone. Tens of thousands of dogs (Hundreds of thousands? A million or so? Who knows?) are reactive when they’re walking on a leash, and the owners of everyone of them dread the moment when some amiable couple calls out, “Don’t worry! Tiger just loves little dogs!” as an Akita homes in on their Jack Russell Terrier like a heat-seeking missile.

I suppose I should be cheered by the fact that so many people optimistically assume that all dogs love others as much as theirs do. It’s nice to know the world is still full of people who assume the best, but after hearing hundreds of horror stories from responsible dog owners, it’s clear that a little thoughtful caution goes a long way. The fact is, lots of leashed dogs don’t do well when they’re approached by another dog, or in some cases, when they even see another dog. These dogs bark and lunge, sometimes in hysterical excitement, other times in what looks like a murderous rage. In either case, they can make life awfully difficult for their humans, who are just trying to do right by their dogs by walking them around the neighborhood. As long as you’re not the one haplessly attached to the leash,



it’s actually a fascinating problem, a perfect example of how a behavior can be caused by a vast range of motivations or emotional states and yet end up looking much the same in its expression.

We all know that lots of dogs are overly reactive on-leash, even when they’re the life of the party off-leash at the dog park, but why that might be so is an interesting question. My guess is that either fear or frustration is the driving force for most dogs—fear of being trapped with no room to maneuver in defensive dogs, or perhaps of getting that awful leash/collar correction that so often happens when they start to run toward another dog. Frustration is another common motivator—leashes often keep dogs from doing what they want to do, and it’s easy to imagine how that could be frustrating. Certainly most of us have no trouble understanding how frustration can evolve into aggression. Is there anyone who hasn’t been tempted to throw his or her computer out the window? I remember a news story years ago about a man who pulled out a pistol and shot an uncooperative soda machine. Everyone I know laughs at this story, probably because we’re all well acquainted with the way frustration can spiral quickly into unreasoning rage.

Along with fear and frustration, I suspect that some dogs are simply so excited at the thought of meeting another dog that they go into emotional overload. The joke “I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out” comes to mind. In a few cases I have seen dogs who bark and lunge toward other dogs with the apparent desire to kill them sooner rather than later; fortunately, that seems to be a rare occurrence.

Superficially, all of these interior motivations can express themselves in a similar exterior performance. Good trainers and behaviorists use subtle visual signals to get a read on a dog's internal motivation, an evaluation that can be critical when you reach the point of letting your dog interact at close range with other dogs. But any reactive dog, no matter what his motivation, can be taught to walk politely by another dog by learning to respond to two simple signals.

Of course, if you're the person walking the reactive dog, you need to learn them too. After all, there are two of you out there, and given that you're stuck at the other end of the leash, you'll need to work on your own responses. Most of my clients with dog-reactive dogs greet the sight of another dog with an internal "Oh NO!" accompanied by enough adrenaline to fuel a power station. Guiltily, they tell me that they know their dog is picking up on their tension, and that they shouldn't get nervous when they see another dog. Let me go on record right now: If you've learned that other dogs can spell trouble, sometimes big, bad trouble, you've every reason in the world to get tense when you spot Corrigan the Corgi running toward you. Of course, it's true that tension at the sight of another dog moves quickly from one end of the leash to the other, but how else could a person possibly feel? That's the beauty of the two signals I'm about to describe: they will help you as much as they help your dog.

The first is gloriously simple, so simple that I felt guilty at first when I taught it to clients, worried they weren't getting their money's worth when I gave them the behavioral equivalent of "take two aspirins and call me in the morning." You simply teach your dog to automatically look at your face the instant she sees another dog and voila! You've solved your problem. By replacing a problem behavior—barking and lunging—with a positive one in which your dog looks at you in anticipation of a treat—your dog (and you) can switch from "Oh no!" to "Oh boy!" when you see another dog.

"Right," you may be saying, and if your voice is dripping with sarcasm I won't hold it against you. If it were easy, you would have done it a long time ago. It's not easy—it's just simple, and those are very different things. The process itself takes time and effort, but it's amazingly effective once you know how to get started. Details are important here, so be

sure you pay attention to what's happening when you're out on a walk. Most importantly, be proactive rather than reactive, though it's contrary to the way most of us do things. Start working on this issue when you're not out walking your dog.

The key is to start, as all good training should, in an area with no distractions. Just you, your dog and the treats or toys your dog lives for. Teach her to look at your face when you say "Watch" or "Here" (avoid using her name), at first with no distractions, building up after a few weeks to some mildly interesting distractions like someone walking across the street, or a noise that draws her attention. Once she responds 90 percent of the time, start asking her to "Watch" when she sees another dog with whom she's friendly.

Here's one of those important details: Be very aware of the distance between the dogs, and only ask for a "Watch" before you think your dog might react. If you find yourself a bit too close, avoid reinforcing that old, bad habit of barking and lunging by turning and walking in the other direction. Early in training, before a dog is ready to perform under such an arousing situation, most people let the dogs get too close together. You want to help your dog learn a new habit, not force her into situations in which she's doomed to fail.

While you're working on "Watch," most dogs will turn to look at your face, collect their treat and go right back to looking at the other dog. That's great, because now they've rewound the tape, which allows you to practice "Watch" again. And again, and again—keep it up for several repetitions, then turn and walk away before your dog begins to get reactive (as she becomes more reliable, you can begin to work on the cue when the distance between the two dogs is shorter). The goal is to ask for a "Watch" every single time your dog looks at another dog, because if you do, eventually she's going to anticipate your cue and turn and look at your face voluntarily.

This is when you pull out all the stops and jackpot her with 15 treats in a row (sequentially, not all at once) and enough hoopla to impress upon her that she just accomplished the canine equivalent of winning the World Cup. This is what you've been working toward—the point at which the approaching dog becomes the cue. This "autowatch" means that your dog is responding to the sight of another dog by

looking at you rather than barking or lunging. Let your dog know, every time she does it, that this response gets an extra special reinforcement from you, and she'll start doing it more and more on her own.

Of course, as we all know, the learning curve is never smooth, and you're going to have setbacks. What happens when you and your dog are blindsided by a dog appearing around a corner a few feet away? Whether your dog starts to bark and lunge or not, if you know that the dog is too close for comfort, just turn and swiftly walk in the opposite direction. Don't stop to discuss it with your dog, do not ask your dog to do something that might be over her head, do not pass GO and do not collect \$200. Just go. It helps to practice this maneuver too, because when you need it, your brain isn't going to be at its best. Think of how well your brain worked when you were trying to solve complicated math problems under time pressure in an exam. Because adrenaline is not always our friend, practice "emergency" turns so that when you need them, they just happen.

And, oh yes, what about that couple down the block waving and grinning as their dog charges toward yours? It's a bit much to ask your dog to "Watch" your face as some lug sniffs and slobbers all over her, so here's a second strategy: If you have time, my personal favorite is to call out "My dog has mange," or "I think it's okay, she's almost over parvo!" Sometimes you can motivate others to call their dog back, if they can, that is. Many people aren't able to do that, no matter how cheerful their demeanor, so you're likely to find yourself pretty much on your own.

In that case, an "emergency sit/stay," is a good tactic. Teach your dog to stop and stay behind you while you intercept the approaching pooch with a sweeping "Sit" signal or better yet, a handful of treats thrown hard and fast at his face. This doesn't work with all dogs, but you might be surprised at how often it's effective. If you're unlucky enough to have a dangerous dog lurking somewhere in your neighborhood, you might even consider carrying citronella or pepper spray. I say this with caution, however, because anytime you go on the offensive, you run the risk of eliciting defensive aggression. Additionally, sprays can blow back into your or your dog's face depending on the wind, so they're not to

be taken lightly.

What's most important is to have a plan of action so that you are as prepared as possible for any contingency. Leaving the house on a wing and a prayer with a dog-reactive dog is like gambling—sometimes it works out, and sometimes it doesn't. If, on the other hand, you have some practical tools under your metaphorical belt (collar?), you'll be ready for any contingency. Then you—take a deep breath here—can be the one smiling and waving on neighborhood walks. Whew.

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