

Reacting On Walks



Why do some dogs react aggressively when on lead?

Many dogs can react in an aggressive manner towards other dogs when out on walks. This is often very distressing and embarrassing for us as owners and stressful for the dog.

However, barking and lunging at other dogs whilst out on walks are only symptoms! To find a solution to your dog's aggressive behaviour, we must determine what the cause is.

Safety First

If your dog reacts aggressively to other dogs, make sure that you have them under close control at all times, and consider muzzle training them to keep everyone safe.

These measures can be short-term, but are important to ensure your dog is protected as well as others.

Reasons for your dog's reaction

Generally, there are two main reasons why dogs can appear to react in an aggressive manner on walks:

Fear

Fear is a common factor that can result in aggressive displays. It may be that your dog has had a bad experience with another dog in the past, which has caused them to be afraid. It may be one type of dog, or it may have generalised to all types of dogs.

Although it often does not look like a dog behaving aggressively on the lead is afraid, this is because they feel they must be on the defensive and 'get in there first' to defend themselves. This can happen as a result of even just one scary experience with another dog. Some dogs are naturally just more able to cope with scary events than others, and they may think they are being threatened even when we know they are safe. Never underestimate how important it is to protect your dog as much as possible from negative experiences with other dogs.

Often, when on a lead, your dog may be too close to another dog to remain calm (especially on pavements and enclosed spaces like alley ways). Dogs can often feel 'trapped' whilst on their lead and unable to escape, which means that they react aggressively to make the thing they fear – the other dog – go away.



Generally, this behaviour will work, resulting in you, as the owner, turning around as quickly as possible and walking in the opposite direction. This becomes self-rewarding to the dog who realises that acting aggressively works and, therefore, is more likely to try this behaviour next time they are in a similar situation.

Frustration

Your dog may appear to be making a lot of noise (and what appears to be an aggressive display), but it may simply be a case of frustration. Generally, these displays become worse when the dog isn't allowed to greet other dogs. The dog may want to go and say hello however, as the lead is preventing them this may lead to barking and/or lunging. Alternatively, sheer excitement could be the cause of the barking.

A combination of fear, frustration and excitement

Sometimes a dog can react aggressively due to just one of the reasons above, or a combination of all three.

Introducing the Four Fs

When a dog sees something they fear or perceive as a threat, there are four ways the dog can respond. These are known as the Four Fs and they are:

- Freeze
- Flight
- Fiddle (also known as 'faffing around' or flirtatious distraction)
- Fight

Freeze

Most dogs will choose the freeze option first. They may just freeze for a matter of seconds; this often works if the freeze is directed to another dog, as the other dog will recognise and respond accordingly (ie move away). However, when a dog is on the lead we may not be aware that our dog has frozen and may continue to force the dog to move towards the thing they fear. This means that the dog learns that freezing is ineffective, so the dog will try another option.

Flight

The second choice for most dogs is flight where they will try to move away from the scary thing. When they are on a lead, however, they cannot move away. This is the reason why many dogs are more reactive on lead than when off lead, as when they are off lead they can move away. This then results in the same issues as in freeze.

Fiddling

When it comes to fiddling you may find that your dog starts to 'faff around'. Generally, this type of behaviour is directed at the owner and is a way for the dog to communicate that they are uncomfortable.

You may also find that your dog suddenly becomes interested and intent on sniffing a patch of grass, or ground; the dog will 'fiddle' and 'faff around' to avoid looking at or interacting with the scary thing.

Fight

Fight is a last resort for most dogs and includes aggressive displays that are designed to result in increased social distance from the scary thing. The purpose of an aggressive display, however scary it may seem, is to avoid a physical fight. It is not in the dog's best interest to engage in physical conflict with another dog as it is very stressful and may result in serious injury.

Unfortunately, dogs learn very quickly that aggressive displays are effective in achieving what the dog wants – the scary thing goes away, or the dog is taken away from it, resulting in increased social distance. Also, displays of aggression cause the release of adrenalin, and this 'adrenalin rush' can be rewarding for some dogs.

Prevention and management

Once you have identified the reasons for your dog's aggressive displays, it makes it easier to prevent and manage the situation. It is important for you to manage all situations, such as walks, so that your dog does not have the opportunity or does not feel the need to react to the scary thing.

Do not try to diagnose the cause of your dog's behaviour alone. This is a complex issue and as we mention above, can be due to a combination of factors. To help your dog regain their confidence, or develop their on-lead skills, ask for help from a qualified behaviourist.

Further help

If your Forever Hounds Trust dog reacts inappropriately to other dogs on walks, please do contact our Post Homing Support Team for help and advice. You can reach the team by emailing: behaviour@foreverhoundstrust.org

This factsheet is the property of Forever Hounds Trust and is protected by copyright. It must not be reproduced, modified, or rebranded in whole or in part without the express permission of Forever Hounds Trust. Where any part of this material is used or referenced elsewhere, appropriate credit must be given to Forever Hounds Trust.