



Leash Frustration

Leash frustration (also known as "barrier frustration" or "leash aggression") is a fairly common behavior in dogs. It usually starts fairly innocuously when a friendly, eager or over stimulated dog sees another dog on a leash and lunges for it. The owner's subconscious, knee-jerk reaction is to tug, yank or jerk the dog back on the leash.

The next time the dog meets another dog, he starts getting anxious in anticipation of the owner's reaction; which makes the dog bark, jump, lunge more. This will then elicit a stronger jerk, pull, or tug from the owner (who is also starting to display anxiety). As you see, a snowball effect is in motion and the problem just escalates. Soon, your dog is the neighborhood bully and you are embarrassed to walk him in daylight!!

Other dogs have leash frustration due perhaps to being attacked by another dog and therefore they feel threatened when meeting another dog while on the leash. In this case, the dog feels trapped and unable to flee (thus he reverts to barking and growling and raising his hackles). NOTE: most dogs with leash frustration are fine off-leash; even if it appears that the dog will tear into any dog they see on-leash.

In either case, the dog has learned to associate "meeting other dogs while on the leash" with a jerk, tug, pull, etc which then causes anxiety for the dog. In other words, in the dog's mind, "approaching dog while on leash predicts a jerk from owner." The dog has learned through classical conditioning (Pavlov's salivating dog theory). So, as the owner, you can teach the dog to change this association from "approaching dog while on leash predicts bad things" to "approaching dog while on leash predicts good things." The "good thing" that you can use is food (dog treats).

In the training, you will be pairing two things together (approaching dog with food). The more consistent you can pair these two things (called stimuli) together, the faster the learning occurs. What this means for you is that every time you take your dog out on a leash, carry dog treats with you.

One quick word on treats - Make the treats soft and small. Avoid dry dog biscuits as they take too long to chew and swallow (dog will get distracted and learning will not occur). Make sure your dog likes the treats you chose!!!

Armed with treats, take your dog on a walk. At the beginning, try to avoid situations where you know the dog will react. In other words, use wide trails, and try to walk your dog during times when there are fewer dogs out on walks.

As soon as you see an approaching dog, lead your dog off the trail (so the approaching dog is not TOO close) and try to get your dog to sit. Even he you can't get him to sit, start giving him the treats. Do this until the other dog passes and your dog calms down. Your dog is learning is to change the

association of "approaching dog predicts jerk" to "approaching dog predicts food!!!" Don't forget to EXHALE!!!! Dogs can pick up on OUR anxiety, too, so you must stay calm.

Learning does not occur overnight. You will have failures at first (dog will still lunge, bark, etc). Don't give up. Be consistent and keep feeding the food when other dogs come into view. Over time, your dog will learn the new association and he will not be anxious and not react when other dogs approach.

Once your dog can sit quietly while another dog goes by, try walking him past dogs (while giving food). You will gradually be able to wean him off giving him food every time you see another dog; but this will come in time.

Consider using a Halti head harness on the dogs that have leash frustration. The Halti is a great tool as it gives you a little more control. With a Halti, you can gently turn the dog's head toward you to get his attention while you are giving him the food. The success of a head harness depends on a very slow step-by-step introduction. Combined with the use of a two ended leash, allowing two points of contact will give further control as well as very clear signals to the dog of your intentions. One point of contact coming from the neck does not give a clear signal to the dog which way you want him to turn or slow down or stop. Your dog will be grateful for the clear signals as well.

