

Handling On Leash Aggression

By Suzanne Clothier



Perhaps one of the most embarrassing behavior problems is a dog who acts aggressively on leash, whether towards dogs, other animals or people. Often these dogs do not exhibit any aggression off leash. Though puzzling to owners, the difference between off leash and on leash behavior offers a clue to the problem as well as the solution. Recognize that on leash aggression always involves unintentional signals from the owner which create a vicious cycle. Here's how:

At some point, usually in adolescence, the dog growls, barks, lunges at or snaps at a dog or person. The owner is surprised and embarrassed, and not sure what to do. If not handled correctly, the dog may persist in this behavior and get worse over time.

Understandably, the owner begins to anticipate any situation which might trigger this behavior. Spotting an approaching dog or person before the dog does, the owner tightens up on the leash so he can control the dog better, stiffens his own body posture and holds his breath. The dog notices the change in the leash tension, the owner's body posture and breathing, and begins looking to see what has the owner so worried, and once he spots it, begins his aggressive behavior.

Did you know that the first step in attack training is to give the dog something or someone he wants to get to, while using a tight lead and tense body posture to excite the dog into a more aggressive state? In the case of one leash aggression, the owner actually makes the situation worse without meaning to, and the dog simply responds to signals received from the owner.

What can you do to solve the problem? Here's the basics:

1. Train! Take the time to teach your dog self control and basic obedience commands which you can reinforce, and praise his good behavior.
2. Be alert to the earliest signs. No dog spends his entire life in an aggressive state. Learn what body language your dog exhibits when he is calm and relaxed, and what changes occur as he moves into a more aggressive mood. Watch for changes in ears, head and neck carriage, eye shape and expression, mouth and whisker changes, tail carriage and overall posture. Intervention at the first sign of a problem is more successful than trying to deal with the full blown aggression.
3. Redirect the dogs attention. By giving a command he knows in a cheerful, upbeat tone, you can redirect the dogs attention back to working with you. If possible, change direction and move away from the situation – the dog cannot walk briskly with you and be aggressive at the same time.
4. Change the body posture, change the emotional state. Body language is nothing more than an external expression of an internal state. It is possible to change an emotional state by changing body posture and vice versa. This is why the advice to "Stand up straight, smile and you'll feel better" actually works! In the case of aggression, imagine how hard it would be to be angry if you were sitting in a comfortable chair with your face and head relaxed.

With a dog, you can physically change the body posture, and thus shift the emotional state, by simply asking the dog to sit (a neutral, non-aggressive position) and using your hands to stroke ears, mouth, head and hackles back to a more relaxed position. This is not petting, and you are not trying to reassure the dog. Concentrate on changing the body posture using firm strokes of

your hands at the same time you insist the dog sit quietly with no tension on the leash. This very simple technique is amazingly effective.

Be aware of your breathing and body posture. Since we tend to hold our breath, and thus tense our muscles, when nervous (facts that do not escape the dog), it is important to breathe in a more normal fashion. The easiest way is to either sing or tell the dog a fairy tale, such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears. While this sounds silly, the very silliness keeps you calm and relaxed. How uptight can you get talking about a blonde and three bears in the woods?

5. Keep the leash loose. Remember tension on the leash encourages aggressive behavior. Put the dog under a command, like "sit", using the leash if needed to help him, but then immediately loosen all tension on the leash. This does NOT mean to give the dog the full freedom of his leash – keep your hand on the leash in such a way so that if needed you can quickly control him, but do not have any tension on the leash. If the dog breaks position, quietly remind him what he was asked to do, and reposition him.
6. Learn the difference between aggression and an appropriate response to rudeness. Far too many dogs are labeled aggressive when in fact they are responding in a perfectly appropriate canine fashion to rudeness. This usually occurs with others dogs whose owners allow them to be very rude because they believe that their dog is simply saying "hello" to your dog. What is really happening is a canine version of a complete stranger rushing up to you and hugging and kissing you! If you verbally snapped at such a person and pushed him away, you would be well within your rights, and not considered aggressive. Don't let your dog be rude, and try to protect him from well meaning but uninformed owners who allow their dogs to be rude.
7. Shouting doesn't equal murder! Very few canine arguments result in any serious injuries. Though it is scary when dogs snap, growl and bark, remember that dog behavior is mostly posturing and threats designed to avoid real conflict. Just as you may raise your voice when upset to warn someone that you are angry, this does not mean you will escalate to real violence. Your dog uses his body language and vocalizations in the same way. Should a physical conflict arise, most dogs have bite inhibition and rarely inflict any serious damage. Knowing this allows you to stay calmer, and not imagine the worst!

This article is provided as an educational service. The author hereby grants permission for individuals & non-profit organizations to reproduce and distribute this article under the following conditions: Full credit to the author is prominently given on each & every copy, with the notation "Copyright 1996 Suzanne Clothier. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Flying Dog Press – 1-800-7-FLY-DOG." All copies distributed must be provided free of charge. If reproduced in a newsletter or magazine, full credit must be given and a copy of the publication sent to Flying Dog Press. A hard copy of this article, suitable for reproduction, is available – please see the Articles Menu page for full details.