

By Pamela J. Reid, Ph.D.

Reprinted with permission from Pam Reid.

Exercising my dogs on the bike trails of New Jersey is very different from what I experienced in Toronto. The majority of Toronto dogs are exercised on parks off leash: chasing balls, wrestling with other dogs, jogging with their owners. Dogs see other dogs, they stop and sniff, then carry on their way. The New Jersey dogs I've encountered tended to pull, bark and growl at other dogs.

Some owners scold me for having my dogs run free while others express surprise that my dogs run alongside the bike without leashes. Interestingly, dogs are not permitted off leash on any public property in this country. These dogs seem to be poorly socialized with other dogs, and many display what is called leash induced aggression.

The alien experience

In her acclaimed book The Culture Clash, Jean Donaldson has us imagine that the earth has been taken over by aliens and we are kept as their pets. We are contained in cages, restrained by collars and leashes, and spoken to in a foreign tongue. From the time we leave our mothers, we are kept away from other people. We often see each other, but rarely are we able to make contact. Just imagine how bizarre and frustrating that would be! Dogs that display leash induced aggression often started out as friendly, sociable puppies. One plausible scenario goes like this: the pup becomes very excited when he sees other dogs on the street and pulls to say hello. The owner scolds the pup and pulls back on the leash or walks the other way. Each time this happens, the pup gets a little more frustrated. At some point, the frustration reaches a critical threshold and the pup needs an outlet to lessen his arousal. He tries barking, jumping or lunging on the leash. He feels a little better. These self rewarding behaviours escalate and become conditioned to the sight of other dogs and to feel of restraint from the leash. If the dog does get close to another dog, he can't subdue his emotions and he often comes on too strong or may even bite! Contrast this with a puppy that has frequent contact with other puppies and dogs. He meets new dogs regularly and has plenty of opportunity to play. It's not such a big deal if this puppy gets pulled away from another dog on the street because "Hey, it's just another dog". He knows that soon he'll be in the park where he can sniff butts and play to his heart's content.

Calling the dog's bluff

If caught early on, many of these leash aggressive dogs come around with extensive socialization. I sometimes recommend daily sessions at an off leash dog park. It is important, though, to take the dog off leash before it meets the other dogs. If you are unsure as to how the dog will behave in this situation, use a basket muzzle to minimize risk for other dogs. Realize, however, that if the muzzled dog gets involved in an aggressive encounter, he is at a disadvantage and could be injured. I prefer to hand select a few dogs that are relatively unresponsive to aggressive threats and keep the potential aggressor on a long line to enable quick intervention if needed. Usually, the dog becomes a little more socially acceptable with each visit until he learns to interact and play with other dogs. Once he has the opportunity to meet and play with new dogs on a regular basis, his reaction to dogs on the street is usually attenuated because dogs are not such a novelty.

Street smarts

Leash induced aggression is easy to prevent by teaching puppies street smarts. In addition to allowing my puppy to socialize daily with other dogs, I condition him to expect treats from me when passing dogs and people on the street. Each time we see someone coming, I call him to me and allow him to nibble at a treat or tug at a toy as we walk by. Then I put the treats or toy away until the next passerby. Pretty soon, the pup is looking at me every time someone approaches. Eventually my dog just ignores passing people and dogs but checks in with me just in case he might score a goodie!

The same procedure often works to eliminate well established leash aggression. A dog that is highly food or toy motivated can be distracted by the owner, enabling the dog to get by without losing control. The original association of dogs passing by and feelings of frustration are replaced with a new association of dogs passing by and the anticipation of rewards. When the source of the rewards is the owner, the dog switches his attention from the other dog to the owner. Voila! No more uncontrollable aggression! Some dogs need a little extra incentive to inhibit their obnoxious street behaviour: A client's border collie got so riled up that he didn't care about treats or toys when another dog was in view, even if he was on the opposite side of the street. We fitted him with a citronella anti-bark collar. The first time he barked at a dog, the collar triggered. He immediately stopped and looked around. Then he looked back at the dog and barked again. The collar sprayed again. His owner cued him to sit and rewarded him with a treat. He was then easy to distract with treats as the dog walked by. By the time four dogs had gone by, border collie was trotting along beside his owner, eating snacks and completely ignoring the other dogs.

To be sure, not all dogs are this easy! I need to caution that it is imperative to make sure the citronella spray doesn't traumatize the dog and make things even worse. The use of punishment is sometimes warranted because it is necessary to find a means to inhibit the aggression so that acceptable behaviour can be encouraged and reinforced.

A vicious cycle

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of resolving leash-induced aggression is the leash. Sometimes just the feel of the leash snapping onto the collar is sufficient to get the dog aroused. When another dog is spotted, aggressive behaviour ensues. Without the leash, many dogs react in a friendly manner but, understandably, the owner is terrified to free the dog of the restraint for fear the dog would fight. And so, a vicious cycle is established. Breaking the cycle takes careful planning, experienced guidance and plenty of nerve. It is wise to seek the help of a professional trainer, so that you are able to reinforce the appropriate behaviours.