

The Nighttime Dog Walker's Club – Antisocial Behavior on Leash

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This is such a common problem with dogs! We get several calls each week from pet owners who have dogs that behave poorly toward other dogs when they are walked on a leash. Often this behavior is described as aggressive and that can be quite confusing to those who have dogs that play at dog parks but then lunge and bark when on leash. Pet owners are frustrated and embarrassed by their dog's behavior! Often, they try to walk their dogs when no one else is likely to be out – in the dark of night. Or they just don't walk their dogs at all because it is all too much to handle.

We call this behavior leash reactivity. Leash reactive dogs may bark, growl, lunge, pull, bounce around, etc. when they see another dog. Leash reactivity occurs with all breeds of dogs and at all ages, though it is most common when dogs are between the ages of 1 to 3 years. Some dogs become so wound up that they redirect that behavior onto their owners or even the other dog with whom they are walking. We have seen owners nipped, bitten, clothes torn, and fights with the other dog when more than one is walked at a time. Depending on the size and behavior of the dog, it can be quite unsafe! Often these dogs can be extremely difficult to control during this behavior.

By the time we are called, owners have already tried everything they know to do and nothing has worked well. So why is this happening and what, if anything can be done? More often than not the behavior is stemming from frustration. The restraint and limitations afforded by the leash can be very frustrating to a dog. When dogs become frustrated, they can become angry. When they are angry their behavior can look or even be quite aggressive. We do see many cases in which the dog is truly friendly with other dogs when the meeting occurs off leash. Of course there are cases in which dogs are just plain antisocial toward other dogs. Regardless – the behavior of acting out on the leash is something that can be addressed. It is not just about learning to heel or learning better leash techniques. It is about teaching these dogs about impulse control when they see another dog. Leash reactive dogs need to learn how to channel their frustration and not engage with every dog they see.

Protocols often involve an initial evaluation so we can see and understand the behavior. From there, a systematic protocol is created in which one step builds on another. Practice is essential and having friends or coworkers available to help with their dogs is invaluable. We generally do not recommend group classes for these dogs for two main reasons. First – obedience training alone will not resolve this problem. Second – dogs are often too stimulated and reactive to handle a group class.

If you have a dog reactive dog, please get help. This is an ideal time of year to work on things – before the heat of the summer brings scorching pavement. Talk to friends or coworkers who may need help as well. It is a rewarding process and it is exciting to be able to be a part of your neighborhood community – during the daytime!