

Your Best Reaction is NO Reaction!

By Susan Carney

- Another dog
- Visitors at the door
- Strangers in your yard
- Kids on bikes
- The mailman
- A squirrel (darn squirrels)

For many dog owners the above list of people or things can make for a miserable time with their dog. Aggression towards strangers, kids or dogs is a very real problem, and knowing how to deal with it, and even change it, can change your life and your relationship with your dog.

Traditionally when a dog lunges, bites at the air or barks uncontrollably at something, we call it “aggression.” No matter what or who your dog is fixed on, the behavior is scary and prevents a lot of dog owners from socializing their dog, having friends over or simply enjoying their companion dog. Believe it or not, true aggression is actually quite rare. Although all dogs are capable of aggression and will resort to biting or even fighting with and killing something that threatens them, it is normally the very last option they choose in any conflict situation.

All dogs are equipped with the flight, fight or freeze mechanism that helps them decide how to deal with a scary or threatening situation. In a “conflict” (which again can be the mailman, a visitor at your door or another dog walking by) dogs choose in the first few seconds what their plan of action will be. Their choice, again, 90% of the time is to NOT cause a conflict.

Ask yourself this question; “What happens when a dog barks, snaps at the air, or lunges at the end of a leash or tie out? You, other dogs and everybody else LEAVES. THAT is exactly what the dog wants...for you to leave. S/he is really saying, “Hey you, go away, can’t you tell how big and scary I am, not to mention that you are trespassing or just plain getting too close to me!”

So what is this behavior and how can you make it stop.

If a dog was aggressive and had the intent to do harm...the behavior would be entirely different. You would be more likely to see quiet stalking, charging and a good solid bite, and it would happen right away! When a wild dog (like a coyote or wolf) goes on the hunt, they don’t announce it to the animal they are hunting, by lunging in place, growling and barking... do they? We all know that dogs are pack animals and that within their packs there is a leader. So, if you were the leader of your pack what would your job be?

1. Protect the pack
2. Protect the territory
3. Provide food
4. Lead the hunt

Now isn’t that interesting. Look at the similarities. Barking and lunging would get me to leave. Could it be that what is really happening here is that your dog feels in some way that s/he is the leader, and this job of protecting (you, her/himself and the territory) belongs to him/her.



What if we were to deal with this conflict for our dog, taking the job of leader (see Leadership Exercises) away from your dog? Would the behaviors lessen or disappear altogether? We have found that they will!

The following exercises will give you the reactions you need when presented with what your dog sees as a conflict. If you follow these reactions as well as the leadership exercises defined in a separate handout you should be able to stop these behaviors or at least make the less likely.

Conflict solving inside the home

We talked about taking the “job of protecting” away from your dog when you are at home or on the walk. Your body position is very important in these instances. We do not want to scold or say, “NO,” but rather let your dog know through your body language and attitude that, whatever is happening is not a problem and you will take care of it, because you’re the leader. ☺

Each and every time you are confronted with a stranger (or visitor) at the door or someone outside the window (that your dog sees and reacts to) this is what you will do:

1. Leash on
2. Treats in hand
3. Avoid touching your dog in any way. TOUCH is a reward and grabbing your dog’s collar is rewarding them for whatever they are doing at that moment. The leash will give you the control you need without you having to touching your dog.
4. Slide your entire body in between the door and the dog. Facing your dog say, “I’ve got it” or “this is not your job.”
5. Pick up the leash.
6. Tell the person to come in.
7. BACK UP about 6-8 feet and step on the leash, leaving about 18 inches of the leash free. Do not wrap the leash around your hands or arms. Drawing your dog closer to you will make the problem worse.
8. Tell the visitor that you are in training and to ignore the dog until it stops jumping or vying for attention. You may have to wait a bit, but it will be worth it in the end.
9. If your dog is not responding show him the treat, but don’t give it to him until he does something you like: Sit, stop jumping or just relax...Reward any of those.

Do this with noises, squirrels outside the window, visitors or any time your dog jumps and barks at something outside.

Conflict solving outside on a walk

You’re going to use the same technique of getting in between your dog and whatever it is s/he is focused on, but you will need some distance between you for safety and to use as reward. Dogs love to explore what they are barking at, so forward motion towards that thing or person can be very rewarding.

1. When a dog, cat, child or person shows up and your dog starts to act up, take 3-6 steps backwards, shorten the leash and get in front of your dog. Do not pull the dog close to you.
2. Say, “Enough, I’ve got it.” (Or whatever comes to mind), but not “NO.”
3. Then wait for the dog to respond by relaxing or calming down a bit. REWARD that with a treat and try getting closer, or at least walking on past the person at a distance.
4. Try this about 3 times and reward anything good that you see.



5. If it doesn't work, walk backwards even more and try again (3 times) or go home and end the walk. Your dog will catch on very quickly that, if s/he reacts this way, s/he will not get to finish the walk, will get no attention, nor a treat.

No reaction to other dogs

Often when people out on a walk with their dog come across another person with a dog, their very first response is to shorten the leash, pull their dog close and in front of them and pet it saying, "Shhh, shhh, quiet or stop. When you come across another dog, your best reaction is NO reaction. Your job is to stand at the end of the leash and basically be a "tree," keeping the leashes from crossing and being ready to back away if you feel the need.

If your dog simply notices a dog from a distance, do nothing and give her 30 seconds to decide to ignore and move on. If s/he does give her a treat and say, "GOOD BOY/GIRL."

If your dog notices a dog and starts to react as it is coming closer and closer. Do the same thing, NOTHING. Depending on your comfort level, allow the dogs to sniff...give your dog 30 seconds to walk away on his/her own...then gently pull him/her away and say "ENOUGH" or "LEAVE IT," and move on. Once you get about 30 paces away reward with a treat and "GOOD BOY/GIRL."

If you are "surprised" by a dog (off leash), again, do the same thing. NOTHING! Allow your dog to "deal" with the situation without comment or correction. Walk on calmly and - if you are the leader - your dog will follow. Remember, NO reaction is the BEST reaction. If you are uncomfortable at any time leave the area or call out to the dog's owner and ask that they collect their dog. If you are consistent, your dog will develop NO reaction to other dogs, or realize that you prefer no reaction and do whatever you ask.

The act of placing your body between your dog and the object of conflict is a natural movement that dogs do all on their own. It is called 'splitting' and is often used by the leader of the pack when play gets too rough or a dog continually chases or barks at something. When you are outside on a walk the secret to doing it correctly is the distance you put between you and the object. No one should ever get between two dogs when they are in a conflict, so remember to back up first. Distance with any conflict is your best defense. Indoors it is not as necessary, as you are usually dealing with visitors.

Will my dog ever be able to be around other dogs

Once your dog realizes that you are the boss and that you prefer little or no reaction to other dogs and new people you will gain control and have greater and greater success. When that happens you can start re-introducing your dog to other dogs, for example in a dog park. But you can only be responsible for the behavior of your own dog. Behavior is very hard to predict and another person might not have taken the steps you have to ensure a quality meeting between dogs. Be careful.

