

3 top tips for avoiding on-lead confrontations

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Of all the behavioural problems that I see in my practice, dog-to-dog aggression is perhaps likely to cause the most stress and anxiety in humans. It's difficult to deal with and often a challenge to resolve - and this is for many different reasons.

The first of these is how dog-dog aggression makes us feel. No matter what we like to believe, dogs are dogs, and this means that they will sometimes behave in surprising ways. We are kidding ourselves if we believe that we have control over our dogs' emotional responses. Let's face it, most people have unrealistic expectations about this. Despite the fact that they may talk to someone else rudely on the phone, or send a confrontational e-mail, they expect their dog to like every other dog it meets - no matter what he or she is muttering under his doggie breath as he is approaching.

Aggression between dogs often seems to infect people as well, and it is not uncommon for owners of unsociable dogs to tell me that they have been verbally or even physically threatened by another owner because of their dog's behaviour. There's definitely a blame game that goes on here - with the owner of the victim feeling aggrieved that the owner of the perpetrator didn't prevent the incident, even if they didn't predict it themselves.

While there are lots of practical measures we can take to avoid aggressive encounters, the bottom line is that we are really at the mercy of two independent animals meeting and interacting. Most commonly, in my practice, inter-dog aggression falls into two main camps: on lead, and off lead.

On-lead, off-piste

If your dog is sociable with other dogs when off lead, but not when on, you need to ask yourself what is the difference between these two scenarios, from your dog's point of view.

The way that dogs interact with one another is designed to minimise conflict. Most dogs are far better with other canines when they are free to express subtleties of body language, facial expression and distance regulating strategies than they are when restricted by a two foot length of lead. Watch two dogs off lead, meeting for the first time, and this becomes apparent. Both are likely to stop some distance away from each other, in order to assess each other's strength and intentions, without having to get into a confrontation. After this stage, they may approach slowly, before curving round each other and tentatively sniffing. If both are sending out friendly, passive, signals they will either say hello and then pass by, or may play.

Watching two dogs meeting on lead, particularly with a nervous owner on the other end, is a different matter. Both dogs are likely to be forced into meeting head-on. They are made to walk directly towards each other, at the owner's pace. At this stage they are also likely to be displaying challenging body language to each other. Why?

Think about what happens when a dog pulls on the lead, or the owner tries to hold the dog back. The collar tightens, the head comes up to balance the body and the chest and legs rise accordingly. From the other dog's view-point this dog is now approaching in a head-on demonstration of strength and challenge - rearing up at the same time. Both dogs are then likely to use vocalisation - growling, snarling and barking, in order to try to make the other stop at a safe distance. This is in vain, as most owners simply keep walking.

Of course, for the dog on the lead, the owner's responses are then of paramount importance. Owners who believe their dog is being aggressive at this stage may chastise the dog, either by shouting or yanking on the lead. This tells the dog two things - one is that his owner is scared too, and is now barking encouragement, the other is that the other dog is clearly the cause of his owner's sudden aggression - therefore the best bet is to get rid of any other dog as quickly as possible when on lead. In most instances, this is successful. The other dog goes away or is removed by its owner. The owner calms down and may attempt to reassure the dog, thereby giving more rewards to add to the dog's own sense of relief.

Of course, over a period of time this scenario becomes a habitual behaviour pattern, with the dog knowing exactly how to behave because he (or she) has practised it many times in the past. At this stage, other factors are likely to keep the behaviour going. Even if the dog was fearful when he started the behaviour, all those practise sessions ago, now his emotional state is a different one.

Research tells us that success in competitive interactions is highly reinforcing! That means that it's a powerful emotional reward, and will mean that the dog is most likely to repeat the behaviour again, thereby adding to his record of successes in repelling other dogs and making him feel like a victorious winner!

So... there you are, walking your Taluvian Ripple Hound on lead. (Not heard of a Taluvian Ripple Hound ? Really? It's big and hairy, that's all you need to know. Oh, and I made it up, so I didn't offend anyone with a real breed.) You know he can be a little confrontational with other dogs and you know you need to do something different to prevent it from happening... so here are some tips:

1. Do not allow your dog to practise aggression on walks.

This is primarily because when you practise something, you get better at it! Bear in mind that every time your dog has an altercation with another dog, even from a distance, he is practising the behaviour. He's also being rewarded for the behaviour because the other dog will inevitably move away or will be moved away. So, use tip number 3 to help you do this.

2. Do not allow your dog to practise aggression at other times.

Here's something that not many people think about. Every time your dog has an emotional response to another dog, and reacts in the same or similar way that he would when on a walk, he is practising the behaviour. This means if he barks or becomes excited when he hears dogs on TV, dogs outside the house on the path, dogs he sees from the car window, and even imaginary dogs that he thinks he hears at any other time... !

Watch out for these 'practise sessions' and think about how you might be able to prevent them from triggering your dog via prevention rather than cure.

3. Teach your dog a 'let's get out of here' behaviour - and then practise it until it's automatic.

The simplest 'let's get out of here' behaviour is a sudden turn on your heel, so you can walk off in the opposite direction at the first hint of trouble. However, you must teach your dog this as a training exercise well away from any 'crisis' situation, so that as soon as you give the cue (I like Patricia McConnell's expression "Let's Go!") he will turn with you - without any need for tension on the lead or tugging on the collar, which can all exacerbate the situation. You then need to practise this exercise until it's as automatic as tying your shoes.

While these three tips may not 'cure' your dog of dog-dog problems, they are always my first port of call when we need to reclaim some points on the side of peace and harmony, and that's got to be good for everyone's emotional health!