

Living with a Fiesty Fido
A Basic Introduction to Handling Dog-on-Dog Aggression
By Sabine Hentrich, CPDT-KA

When you're walking your dog, are you one of those people who avoid Lincoln and Stanton parks and the other places where dogs congregate to romp? Does your dog get agitated whenever he sees other canines? Are you worried that he will make a complete fool of himself—and humiliate you—by picking fights with the other dogs?

Don't despair just yet; if you can manage a little training, it is likely that you can both enjoy more relaxing walks.

Dogs who react belligerently to other dogs are very common in urban and suburban areas, where they can often see each other although they are kept apart by glass, a fence, a car window, or their leashes. This can create a lot of frustration, and that leads to the behavior you find embarrassing.

The good news is that, by following a combination of management, training, and behavior modification, you can replace your dog's barking, growling, and lunging with a more relaxed demeanor.

Management:

First, consider the set-up of your house and your routines. Can your dog see other dogs and people to bark at through windows or a fence? Can you restrict her access to these "windows of opportunities?" Do you exercise your dog at times of day when the streets and sidewalks are filled with other canines? Does your dog get close to other canines she passes? Every time your dog sees another dog and reacts strongly, she is rehearsing the behavior you would like her to avoid. Your first step should be to minimize and control these situations.

Another step would be to consider your dog's collar and harness. A proper head collar or pull-control harness can be an excellent aid in managing reactive behavior. They help you control your dog and encourage good leash-walking manners. There are many varieties on the market, and a good trainer can help you select one and adjust and use it. And this leads us to the next phase:

Training:

It is a good idea to get some help with training from a professional who is familiar with *positive reinforcement* methods. (Trainers who promise a quick fix or who tell you your dog is "dominant" and has to be shown who's the "alpha" are actually likely to set you back and may increase your dog's aggression.)

Once you have selected a good positive-reinforcement trainer and decided what sort of head halter or pull-control harness to use, discuss the importance of diet, environmental enrichment and exercise for your reactive dog. All of these can be helpful in turning your dog into a well-mannered canine ambassador.

Your new trainer can show you how to teach your dog to walk beside you, sit in front of you, and look at you on cue—all of these are “must” behaviors for reactive dogs in training. Practice first in your home and yard, low-stress environments where your dog is not going to meet his canine nemeses and lose all vestiges of self-control.

Behavior Modification:

Next, arm yourself with the best treats imaginable—real meat and cheese, such as roast beef, chicken, string cheese, deli meat, or meat-based baby food, not dog cookies—and “audition” them with your dog. Let her show you which treats she loves the most; those are the ones you are going to reserve for working on proper dog-dog behavior.

Now grab your treats—and, if possible, your trainer—and head for a place where you will encounter leashed dogs. At all costs, avoid loose dogs, who may accost your reactive pooch in training. Stand at a distance from the other dogs—25 feet or 250 feet, depending on the dog—so that if your dog notices another dog, he does not bark or lunge.

As soon as your dog notices another dog, begin feeding him the special treats. Do this until the other dog is out of sight. You want your dog to think that the best things happen to him when other dogs appear. Eventually, your dog will look at you as soon as he spots another dog. And that is the beginning of real progress that your professional trainer can build upon.

Trouble Shooting:

The bane of every reactive dog owner’s existence is the “don’t-worry-he’s-friendly” neighbor, whose dog is rarely on a leash. You may have to talk to him about how his dog, however friendly, scares you and your dog. You may even have to remind him of D.C.’s leash law and the fines—up to several hundred dollars for repeat instances of failing to have a dog on a leash and under the control of a person who is capable of managing him.

Sounds like a lot of work? Yes, absolutely. But if you go about it in the right way, it can be extremely rewarding and fun for you *and* your dog! Your dog may never be one who will play happily in Congressional Cemetery, but he can learn to walk calmly through your neighborhood.

How long this all takes depends on how long your dog has had problems with other dogs, how old your dog is, and how much time you put into modifying the behavior.

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