

# Freak on a Leash



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## WHAT IS LEASH REACTIVITY?

We've all seen leash reactive dogs; These are dogs that bark and lunge on the end of the leash, often at other dogs and perhaps people too. If you own one of these dogs, don't feel alone! Many of us will own one in our lifetime!

Leash reactivity is a form of Barrier Frustration and occurs when a dog becomes frustrated by a barrier, such as a leash. By definition, frustration is: *"the prevention of the progress, success, or fulfillment of something."* When a dog feels restricted from what they desire most, they get frustrated, which turns into agitation, and is expressed by outbursts. These outbursts often include pulling on the leash, lunging, barking, growling, and sometimes snapping.

Behavior resulting from Leash Reactivity is often interpreted as aggression, however, many leash reactive dogs aren't aggressive at all— or at least they don't start off that way. However, aggression can evolve from Leash Reactivity, if it is left untreated.

## WHAT CAUSES LEASH REACTIVITY?

When people see leash reactive dogs, they sometimes assume that something bad happened to them in the past, to make them that way. Sometimes this is the case, but we can usually look even deeper than that— what caused the bad thing to happen in the first place? Our answer often lies in a combination of the things outlined below.

### ❖ SOCIAL BUTTERFLIES

A majority of leash reactive dogs are, or started out as, social butterflies. Social Butterflies have spent time at dog parks, daycares, and other social meeting grounds. They may even have great social skills— *off leash*. These dogs have grown accustomed to always being able to play with other dogs whenever they see them. The problem, however, is that they quickly learn that the leash takes away their freedom to play like they always have before, which results in frustration and then escalates to leash reactivity. Moreover, the entire situation causes confusion for the dog, because their owner has always let them play with most dogs they have seen, and they don't understand why they can't play now. This confusion compounds their frustration, which leads to agitation and more outbursts.

**If you choose to allow your dog to socialize with other dogs, you must be clear about when it is appropriate, and when it is not. This will require extra training.**

A great compromise is to have a “friends and family” socialization policy, which is a good middle ground between highly-social and antisocial. Their dogs are allowed to socialize, but only with dogs from their owner’s close friends and family. When an owner is clear and consistent, these dogs can easily learn which dogs they can socialize with and which they can’t— making it less confusing for them and less frustrating (making training a lot easier too). This has the extra benefit of minimizing the spread of disease (which is prevalent at areas that have a dense dog population, like dog parks) and it helps decrease the risk of fights because the dog is only allowed to play with other dogs that the owner knows have good manners. You never know what you’re going to run into at the dog park and what bad habits your dog will pick up.



## ❖ CANINE BODY LANGUAGE

Canine body language plays a large role in leash reactivity issues. To get a better understanding of this, we must first look at how dogs normally greet each other without the leash. When 2 off-leash dogs greet each other, they arc their body, approach the other dog from the side, don't make eye contact, and perform a "getting to know you" style dance of going in circles while sniffing each other's bums. These behaviors signal to the other dog that they are friendly and mean no harm. When a dog is on leash, however, it is nearly impossible for dogs to exchange proper



greetings through body language. Even worse, the leash forces the dog into positions which signal to the other dog that they want to fight, even when that isn't their intention. When dogs meet on

leash, they are usually pulling their owner along, which results in completely different body movement including face-to-face greetings with eye contact, a stiff body, head



up high (towering over the other dog), and their chest pushed out. These are all “fighting words” in dog body language. **Dogs should never, ever, be allowed to meet on leash** due to the fact that the leash itself causes dogs to give off the wrong signals, resulting in a much higher likelihood that a fight to break out.

### ❖ LEASHES ARE A TRAP!

Quite literally, leashes trap dogs by impeding their movement. When a dog feels fear (often as a result of miscommunication, such as getting the wrong body signals from another leashed dog), they only have 2 options; Fight or Flight. The leash, however, removes their ability to flee the situation. When frightened, even the friendliest dog has no other choice than to fight.



Dogs know that a fight will result in getting hurt themselves, whether they win or lose. They will go to great lengths to avoid the risks

of fighting; therefore, they will do everything possible to deter dogs from approaching them in the first place. This is where the outbursts come in, such as growling, barking, lunging, and making themselves look big. Outbursts due to feeling trapped are a scare tactic, done for self-preservation.

### ❖ MISREADING THE SITUATION

Even with the best of intentions, owners often misread their dog's communication signals. This is understandable, since humans don't speak Dog. We've all seen it happen; The owner that allows their leashed dog to run up on another dog, usually while exclaiming "My dog is friendly!" We've already learned how leashes cause miscommunication among dogs and how this exact situation can quickly go bad. However, the owner thinks their dog is being "friendly" and "playing" by rushing up to the other dog face-to-face, bumping into the other dog, towering over them (because the leash is pulling the dog upward), and being overly



excited. They have completely missed the fact that this behavior isn't friendly *to the other dog*, it's rude, and sometimes scary, especially to a shy dog!

It's equally important to understand that as puppies grow up, their social structures within the dog community change. Adult dogs will tolerate the poor (rude) social skills from puppies, which is why fewer puppies get bit for poor communication skills. Unfortunately, this gives puppy owners a false sense of security. If an owner allows their puppy to run up to other dogs rudely, eventually another dog is going to "discipline" the puppy for poor communication skills around that 6-month mark (give or take depending on the breed and maturity rate). This is much to the surprise of the puppy's owner, who usually ends up blaming the other dog, when in fact it was the puppy's rude behavior that created the situation to begin with.

Unfortunately, now the puppy has learned that some dogs bite, which is scary and leads us to a vicious circle of "Once bitten, twice shy."

## ❖ ONCE BITTEN, TWICE SHY

Up until now we've explored a variety of ways that leash reactivity has evolved from good intentions. Unfortunately, at this point, things have gotten serious. Our previously social dog is frightened of other dogs because he was "disciplined" by the other dog for his poor, though perhaps unintentional, social behavior. Now the previous social butterfly has turned into Cujo on a leash by barking, growling, pulling, and lunging at other dogs. Cujo is still frustrated that his leash is holding him back, but he no longer wants to go toward other dogs to play, he wants to put on the best show he can in an effort to keep the other dogs away so that he doesn't get bit again! Now we are back to Fight or Flight.

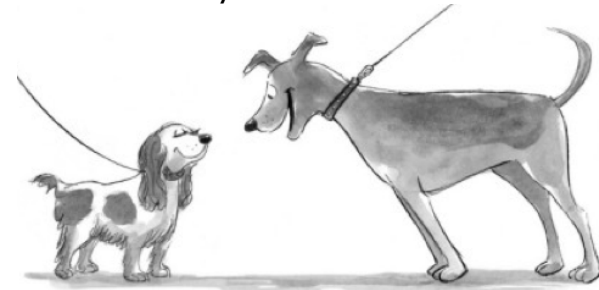
The circle continues when another "Social Butterfly" comes running up to Cujo (who was previously a social butterfly himself), because his owner thinks "He's friendly and wants to play!" just like Cujo's owner once did. The new "friendly" dog has the same poor body language that Cujo had when he was disciplined ... but now this interaction ends in Cujo doing the discipline.





## PREVENTING LEASH AGGRESSION

- 1) Never allow your dog to greet other dogs on leash. No exceptions!** This fosters very clear boundaries for your dog:  
On-leash = No greeting other dogs.  
Off-leash = Play time!



*"Boy, I'd love to meet you sometime off leash."*

- 2) Don't use the leash to hold your dog back (causing frustration). Instead, use other positive training techniques to help keep your dogs engaged and by your side without using the leash to restrict movement. Whenever possible, the leash should be there for safety, not manipulation. Positive training techniques can be learned at a good obedience class.
- 3) Teach a solid Focus command, such as "Watch-me." It is physically impossible for a dog to lunge and bark at other dogs when they are focused only on you.

- 4) Be your dog's advocate! Do not allow another dog run up on your dog. If someone asks if their dog can play with yours, it's okay to say no! If this makes you feel uncomfortable, tell them "I'm sorry, my dog is in training right now and can't greet other dogs. Thanks for your understanding." and walk away.
- 5) If you choose to socialize your dog with other dogs off leash, you must be extra diligent when teaching your dog proper leash skills. As a general rule, you will need to spend twice as much time teaching leash skills to a dog that is used to playing with other dogs. If you allow your dog to greet other dogs on leash, it will be *nearly impossible* to teach good leash skills.
- 6) Don't punish your dog for growling when they are uncomfortable. Punishing a dog when in this scenario will make the situation drastically worse.



Growling is harmless communication telling us that they need our help. If we punish a growl, a dog will be forced to go directly to biting without warning. Punishment may suppress the growl, but it will not eliminate the bite! On the contrary, dogs that are punished for growling are quicker to bite! If your dog growls, see #7

- 7) If your dog shows any signs of discomfort (hesitation, stiffness, ears back, tail between the legs, repeated lip-licking, squinting with their head turned away, growling, etc.), be their advocate. Distract your dog and redirect their attention while leaving the situation so your dog doesn't think their only option is to fight.

**Never force a dog to be in an uncomfortable situation to "deal with it." Forced interaction only increases fear.** If your dog is often showing discomfort, talk to your trainer about positive-based, force-free training methods to build your dog's confidence.





## DEALING WITH LEASH REACTIVITY AFTER IT'S STARTED

- 1) **Leash Greetings should *never* be allowed with Leash Reactive dogs.**
- 2) While it can be difficult when you have a reactive dog, don't panic. If an owner panics, the dog is likely to as well.
- 3) Manage your environment really well, so that your dog doesn't get a chance to blow up at other dogs. One blowup will set you back. If a dog unexpectedly shows up, distract your dog (use a happy voice "Fido, what's over there?!") and briskly walk in the other direction.
- 4) You don't have the ability to manage the environment outside of your home, therefore you must be prepared if you need to take your dog somewhere. ALWAYS carry extremely high value treats such as cooked chicken or hotdog (dog treats will not work in a highly distractible environment!). If you find yourself in a situation where you can't avoid another dog, get those high value treats out and give them in quick succession while you hightail it out of there!

- 5) Teach a solid Focus command. Start in your living room, then slowly move to environments with more distractions. If your dog blows up, it just tells you that you went too far too fast. Go back a step in the process.
- 6) While this outline can point you in the right direction, it is not all-inclusive. A qualified professional trainer is an asset when rehabilitating leash reactive dogs. A good trainer can help you learn to read your dog even better than you already do, as well as give you a systematic approach that is catered specifically for your dog's needs.



