Dog Reactivity:

- Many times reactivity can be onset by a medical issue or stress. Always address any health issues with your veterinarian. Think of how you may act when you do not feel well!
- In many cases, reactivity is fear based. Working with a qualified professional who uses non aversive methods is recommended.
- Not across the board!!! Most dogs are not reactive/ aggressive to EVERY dog they meet or in every situation that they are placed in. Just like people, most dogs do not like EVERY single dog they meet in EVERY situation. However, some dogs do have stronger reactions and or more triggers.
- Genetics and environment both play roles in dog aggression. It isn’t “Nature vs Nurture” it is “Nature +Nurture”. The saying “It’s all in how they are raised” is lacking truth. Yes, caring for a dog properly affects behavior but that is not the only factor. It would be just as ludicrous to believe that if a human came from an abusive upbringing, that they could not become successful, healthy adults! A dog’s background alone, does not predict how that dog will act. Do not profile a dog based on what you know (or think that you know) about their past.
- Same sex pairings (male-male or female-female) and/or dogs who are close in age can be a factor, but there are lots of pairings that live in harmony together. Personalities, body language knowledge and management are important for any multiple pet household.
- Aggression may begin appearing after maturity typically when a dog is 2-5 years old. This doesn’t mean that a dog has “suddenly changed” or is “bad”.
- Challenges/Triggers involving multiple dogs can include: access to beds, couches or high places, small/ narrow space such as doorways, food, treats and toys, (anything viewed as a resource), attention, and stressful or exciting situations.
- Some dogs will only exhibit reactivity when barriers are present>Barriers may include: leashes, kennels, fences, car windows, and windows in a home.
- Reactivity does not always equal aggression. It may be: lack of manners due to improper or no training, lack of social skills, frustration or learned behaviors from accidental or intentional reinforcement.
- Behaviors may include (but are not limited to): Redirection during an exciting moment (example – doorbell ringing), stealing toys and or food, shoving past another dog, standing over another dog. Sometimes these behaviors are accepted when dog is immature, but upon maturity are no longer viewed as acceptable by housemate.
- Some aggressive postures include: Staring directly, baring teeth, vocalizing/growling, and attacking. Many times it begins with the stare and can escalate if warning is not heeded.
- Pay attention to both dogs, and how they are communicating. Many times the dog who is trying to communicate their discomfort is the one who is labeled “dog aggressive”, when in
reality he had been communicating “stop it” politely for some time. When that did not work, he resorted to less subtle means of communication.

• Avoid throwing around the “D” word or assuming that any and every action of a dog is a result of the “D” word? Dominance! Old school dominance theories have been disproven and the word “dominant” is frequently misused. For more information on dominance, please check out this well written article by A.P.D.T. (The Association of Professional Dog Trainers):
  http://www.apdt.com/petowners/articles/docs/DominanceArticle.pdf

And:

Altercations between dogs are frequently between dogs that lack confidence and are unsure or unaware of how to communicate. Relationships between dogs change frequently and there are many factors, just as in human relationships. Do you act the same way around your sibling at home as your new boss at work? Hopefully not!

Helpful Hints for Multi- Dog Household

• Never punish for reactivity. Punishments may temporarily suppress behaviors, but can increase the behaviors and will not help with long term management and training.
• Do not leave dogs together unattended. Crate training definitely comes in handy with multiple dog households.
• Extra tall, strong baby gates: Sometimes prevention is best method, keeping everyone safe. Double gating may be necessary.
• Manage triggers. If your dogs fight over food, do not feed together. If they fight over toys, pick up the toys and save them for one on one time.
• If there are incidents within your home, putting a different sounding bell on each dog’s collar can keep you aware of where each dog is.
• Give dogs a daily break from each other.
• Pay attention to dog body language. Stiff posture, hard stares and snarling. Out of context behaviors such as: excessive lip licking, drinking, sniffing, lack of eye contact, general avoidance can indicate that a dog is uncomfortable with what is going on.
Dog aggression does not mean that you have a bad dog! Management and training can make you a better, more confident owner!

Helpful Hints to Make Walks Manageable, for dogs who react when they are out and about:

- Head collars or front clip harnesses can help maintain control and manage reactive dogs on walks.
- If you have more than one dog, consider walking them separately (for now). Dogs can feed off of each other’s excitement/behaviors. Spending time one on one also gives you a chance to bond and work on training. Then begin doing sessions together and apart.
- Hungry dog will work for food! Save feeding time for walks to reward any time your dog is being polite. Reserve really good treats for situations such as other dogs or people passing by.
- Teach your dog a NEW behavior. Reward with a high value food, BEFORE the dog reacts, from a comfortable distance. As your dog begins to look to you for guidance, you can decrease distance. Soon your dog will associate other dogs with amazing things!
- Taking a group class that uses positive training methods. This will help your dog to behave, even around distractions.
- Consider working with a trainer who uses non-aversive methods. They can help determine if your dog’s issues are just on leash or through barriers. Maybe your dog would do better meeting a dog with similar play style off leash.

Recommended Reading:

There are many great books available to help with reactivity. Some recommended:

- Aggression in Dogs by Brenda Aloff
- How to Right a Dog Gone Wrong by Pamela Dennison
- Bringing Light to Shadow by Pamela Dennison
- Click to Calm Healing the Aggressive Dog by Emma Parsons
- Feisty Fidos by Patricia McConnell
- Scaredy Dog by Ali Brown
For serious aggression issues that cannot be managed, please contact a professional behaviorist. For referrals contact us at: behavior@jaxhumane.org

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