

## Reactive VS Aggressive

The vision we often have of life with a dog involves those pleasant nightly walks. We can feel the bond travel up through the leash as we take our evening stroll with our canine buddy. This picture is one of the many that we envision as we decide to share our lives with a dog. While most dog people share this vision, there are a few that live walking on eggshells when out with the family pooch.

Dogs who react to other dogs, or who react to any stimulus at all, can cause stress amongst the families they share their lives with. Topping off the situation is the feeling of being watched and judged by the many dog walking duos out for their walk. While their dogs bark, and lunge at others, at the end of the lead, their patient owners quickly try to explain their behavior to the others as they pass by. Sometimes the scenario is avoided all together. Guilt and shame quickly take over and walks become later and later into the night. Worse, the walks can decrease dramatically over time, the dog relegated to the back yard as the stress of meeting others of his kind takes its toll on the family.

Over the years, these dogs have been described by their families as aggressive. They may have attached that label, or it may have been attached by a well-meaning dog professional. To have an aggressive dog is often viewed by the public as being partially the fault of the dog's family. Perhaps they didn't socialize him enough, perhaps he didn't learn to walk on lead properly as a puppy or worse yet, perhaps he is just a "bad seed". All these judgments do nothing to help the family, or their dog. In almost all cases, these dogs are not aggressive, but are reactive. You may feel that there is not much difference, and in fact upon viewing the dog, you may deem him aggressive simply because in the world of dogs, that term is more commonly used.

When we take a closer look at the word, we can see that they are worlds apart. The word aggression means the act of attacking without provocation. Therefore, an aggressive dog is viewed as hostile, forceful, assertive and offensive. When we look at the word reactive, we see a much different

picture. It is a bodily response to an external stimulus. Reactive means that no initiative was taken and it is based on an immediate first impression.

Once we are aware of the differences, we can start to unravel the mysteries of the reactive dog, and how best we can help him. Simply choosing the word reactive over the word aggressive when speaking about these dogs is a huge first step. A reactive dog doesn't sound dangerous, and therefore that stigma is taken away. It will help to get professional help when assessing your dog, and if he is deemed aggressive then behavioral modification by a specialist in that area is highly recommended, and in fact would be paramount.

So, how can we care for and manage the reactive dogs? First, it is important to note that reactive dogs are generally under confident dogs, which react out of fear. Fear can stem from a number of factors. Fear of the unknown. Under socialization might be a reason that a dog reacts to his environment. Imagine if you were kept isolated from other people, left to your own devices in an enclosed piece of property and had no access to rock concerts or baseball games. Now, imagine yourself attending a neighborhood BBQ with a local rock band playing. People who had exposure to various stimuli in the past will have very little problem with this situation, even if they didn't care for the band that was playing. Dogs are the same. Without exposure to a wide variety of sights, sounds and general hub-bub as a pup, the experience of life in general outside their own small environment can cause stress and may cause dogs to become alarmed once they meet up with anything unfamiliar.

You may feel that you can't expose your pup to everything he needs to see, hear and smell in his adult life. That may be true, but the more exposure he has to a variety of environments, the more he will roll with the punches later in life. As a member of the SuperDog team, my dogs have the added bonus of being able to travel to many shows outside of the city I live in. While they may not know what it is like in New York City before they arrive, they do know that in the past they have had the privilege of being at many locations, which all turned out to be a lot of fun!

Along with keeping your dog active in the community, there is the issue of nature Vs nurture. This means that part of your dogs reactive behavior may

come from his genetic make-up. Reactive dogs often prefer to live in a bubble. They like their own space and do very well with other dogs as long as they don't approach too fast or come too close. Terriers and herding dogs are amongst those who don't love other dogs in their space. This is a key to helping all dogs. The families that live with dogs who dislike, and therefore react to, dogs rushing up will all give you a big thank you for keeping your distance. This doesn't mean their dogs are aggressive to other dogs, it means they prefer to keep to themselves and will only react when approached quickly.

The owners of the gregarious dogs can often take this the wrong way. Feeling that their dog is friendly, they allow their dog to rush up for a greeting, which can inadvertently set off the reactive dog. This can have many people believing the culprit is the reactive dog, but in fact the gregarious, "friendly" dog may have pushed his luck.

Getting behavioral assistance with a reactive dog should help, but may be a time consuming venture. While you are working on exercises to help him, keep in mind that you need to try to avoid scenes that would allow your dog to feel uncomfortable, or worse, those that may increase his instances of reaction. It is not a cop out to keep a safe distance from the over the top group of dogs at the local park.

While aggressive dogs are often not a good candidate for group obedience classes, many reactive dogs do very well with the co-operation of their classmates. After being assessed as reactive, it is kind to give these dogs a bit of space to allow them to learn in a calm, non-threatening area. You will do this dog no favor by pushing the situation. As friendly as your dog may be, the reactive dog simply can't cope with him being close. He may even learn to like his fellow students, and over time may come to accept them, but time is the key element.

So please, when out for your next walk, when you see a dog having difficulty coming face to face with other dogs on route, pass no judgment and give him space. This will be the best way you can contribute to his well being.