



Why Does my Dog Bark at Other Dogs?

One of the most common complaints we hear from our clients is that their dogs bark and lunge when they pass other dogs while they are out on their walks.

One of the most important things to remember when we want to help change a dog's behavior is to first understand the underlying reason why your dog is doing what they are doing.

Most trainers will blatantly tell you that your dog "Lacks Confidence" and that's why they bark at other dogs while you are on walk.

Lack of Confidence?

While a diagnosis of a "Lack of Confidence" isn't wrong, we feel that it doesn't give an entirely picture of what is actually going on inside your dog's brain when they see that other dog during your regular walks.

Before becoming a professional dog trainer, I had experienced this same problem with one of my dogs, and I went to a local trainer who gave me this answer when I asked why my dog was acting this way. It sounded good to me, but didn't really give me any real understanding of why my dog was doing it or how to fix it.

The trainer even gave me a plan to build my dog's confidence by teaching him a number of commands and tricks, which ultimately did not actually get to the root of the problem at all.

Fear

There is no single reason for every dog who barks at other dogs, but the majority of dogs who react inappropriately to other dogs is a type of fear.

When a trainer tells you that your dog lacks confidence, it is a fancy way of saying that your dog is afraid of something that they don't understand. The problem with the diagnosis of a lack of confidence is that it would lead you to believe that all you have to do is build your dog's confidence and he will be cured.

However, your dog can become extremely confident in other areas of their lives such as obedience training, dog sports, agility, swimming, and exploring new places, but still be fearful when seeing other dogs during your walks or in other situations.

But Why the Barking?

When dogs are afraid they have a few choices, flee, bluff, fight, or freeze. Some likely to simplify it down to the concept of fight or flight response, but dogs are actually a bit more complex than just those two choices.

When a dog is initially fearful of something, they will likely try to put as much space between themselves and whatever it is that they are afraid of. However, while our dogs are on leash, they know that they cannot get away.

Dogs bark as a way of creating space between them and the other dogs, saying “You better stay away from me because I’m big and scary!” Hoping that the other dog will take the warning and stay away.

This is also why we do not ever want to introduce two dogs while we are holding their leashes. If one dog is unsure about the other dog, they will most often try to create space between themselves and the other dog. When we are holding the leash we are reminding them that there is no escape, and that’s when there is more likelihood of an altercation breaking out.

The Solution

The ultimate solution to dog reactivity is a strong trust relationship with the handler/owner. While it sounds simple, this is not something that happens overnight. But the important concept to keep in mind is how you can communicate to your dog that you will not let anything bad happen to them.

Now, this is where it starts to get a little bit more complicated because we can’t just tell our dogs “everything is going to be okay” in stressful situations, even though this is literally something we see frequently happen.

Often what we see when a dog is barking, lunging, and freaking out at another dog is the owner petting, holding, and using a calm or happy voice to try to calm the dog down. In this situation, the owner is actually communicating to the dog that the dog’s action are what they want. If my dog is barking, and I am petting them and speaking in a positive sounding voice, I am reinforcing the dog’s decision to demonstrate that behavior.

Even when our dogs seem entirely focused on whatever it is that they are barking at, they are actually still very aware of what their owner is doing. They are still paying attention to their owners for additional guidance on how to respond to the situation.

What Should You Do?

We are going to work a little bit backwards here. Let’s start in a situation where your dog is already reacting, barking, or lunging at something while you are on your regular walk.

You should stay calm and give the dog as little feedback as possible. What we mean is to not communicate with your dog in anyway when they are reacting. This means no talking to your dog, no pulling or yanking on the leash, no touching your dog, and most of all, STAY CALM.

You also need to stand your ground or walk in the opposite direction if you can. The first thing the dog feels when they pull on the leash, especially while lunging, is the very initial resistance when the leash initially reaches its full extension.

The way most people hold the leash will also allow for the dog to pull hard enough that you end extending your arm as well. When your dog feels the initial resistance from where you were holding the leash, and then pulls your arm to its full extension, that is actually reinforcing their behavior as well. Your dog will feel accomplished at getting that extra foot towards the object of its lunging.

Find a way to hold the leash and stand so as the dog cannot get any additional movement towards whatever it is he is barking at. When your dog gets to the end of the leash, it should be like hitting a wall.

Walking in the opposite direction without saying anything or waiting for your dog conveys the message to your dog that they need to pay attention. Do so calmly, but with a purpose. It is very difficult for a dog to continue barking at something while being forced to move in the opposite direction.

Preventative Measures

The best way to prevent your dog from acting inappropriately towards other dogs as an adult is to ensure the dog gets appropriate socialization as a puppy and during their development stages.

Many facilities and pet programs have puppy play programs where your puppy under a certain age can play and interact with other puppies of similar ages and size. This is a great way for your puppy to develop canine communication skills and learn that other dogs aren't bad.

Once your dog begins entering into maturity, having continued play sessions with similarly aged and sized dogs can help maintain their interpersonal skills as they become adults. Stay away from dog parks because you never know if the other dogs have proper communication skills or if they have appropriate temperaments.

Find opportunities to work on your dog's obedience skills in the presence of other dogs. Start at a distance and in as much of a controlled environment as possible. Training outside of your local dog park is a great place to do this as long as the people entering and exiting the park keep their dogs under control and on leash.

While training around other dogs, pay attention to your dog's body language. If your dog seems stressed, move further away from the other dogs. Look for opportunities to reward your dog for checking in with you if they feel stressed. Your goal is to teach your dog that in times of stress, look to the handler.

Make Stress a Cue

Teaching your dog that when there is something that makes them feel anxious, stressed, or fearful the right thing to do is to look to their handler gives you the opportunity to tell your dog what to do in that situation.

You can use stressful situations to work on your dog's recall command. When they see something that makes them feel stressed, you can back away from them and call them to you. This is a great exercise because it teaches your dog to look for you whenever they see something that stresses them out.

Using repetition can make anything into a new cue. If every-time your dog sees another dog, you call them to you, eventually your dog will start beating you to it and just come to you when they initially see the dog.