

Marie's Den - Leash Frustration & Aggression by Kelly Alver

Leash frustration is a common problem among dogs. I interviewed Marie Joyner about it and below are her recommendations that we hope you will find useful.

Dogs don't like barriers, and psychologically, a leash acts as a barrier to them, preventing access to things they desire. Although it's essential to your dog's safety to be on a leash in public places, the leash may actually cause your dog to feel vulnerable because she's unable to communicate with other dogs naturally. A tightly pulled leash interferes with the dog's body language, making her appear to be taking a more aggressive stance when encountering another dog. This can be misinterpreted by other dogs, causing posturing behaviors and angry communications between them!

There are many techniques you can use to curb leash aggression. Our Companions offers training classes and a walking club to help dogs get used to being around other canines while on their leashes. The classes and walks aren't social events. Instead, these sessions are intended to show dogs they can relax around other dogs, walk on a loose leash, and that they don't need to "greet" each one.

Our Companions training emphasizes an important skill – helping people teach their dogs to pay attention to them instead of surrounding stimuli. The dog's name is used to help her focus on the person, while offering positive rewards to reinforce the appropriate behavior. The goal is to have your dog look to you for direction instead of acting on her own when there's a distraction.

Another effective method is teaching your dog to follow you by walking backwards. Walking backwards prevents your dog from posturing while running into another dog. The dog is taught to respond to her name and then rewarded for following as you move backwards. If you practice this enough, your dog will realize it's more rewarding to follow you than to engage with the other dog. You may also want to consider using a harness for leash walks. A harness provides gentle pressure to help guide your dog into following the leash, and eliminates the oppositional reflex most dogs have with a buckle type collar.

Dogs show tension through their body language. Learn to recognize your dog's cues. If you see your dog stiffen, head and tail erect, curled lips, or raised hackles, distract her and get her to focus on you. Having your dog pay attention to you, by offering praise and rewards when another dog comes near, will help her make positive associations with other dogs. Dogs can also sense when their human companions are uneasy. When you see another dog approach and you tense up, your dog will feel your anxiety and think she needs to be on guard. Try to remain relaxed in these situations to send your dog the right message.

As social creatures, dogs need to be exposed to other dogs and people at an early age, which should continue throughout their lives. Consider looking into doggie day care, where your dog can have positive and safe encounters with other dogs. Make sure you feel comfortable with the day care and their employees. Ask for a recommendation of a reputable doggie day care from your veterinarian, staff at a local pet supply store, or your friends who have

dogs. There are also doggie playgroups and dog parks where your dog can socialize with other dogs off leash. Just be sure to supervise your dog at all times to ensure a happy and safe experience.