

## WHAT TO DO IF YOUR DOG IS WORRIED OR FRUSTRATED WHEN ENCOUNTERING OTHER DOGS

It's wonderful that that we can take our dogs outside to enjoy themselves, and walkies should be an enriching and fun time for them – however for some dogs the very presence of another dog in their immediate surroundings can make them feel very uncomfortable indeed.

This can be incredibly disheartening and distressing for owners, who just want their dogs to have a nice time! But if your dog does behave in this way don't worry, there are reasons which explain this behaviour and many ways to help your dog feel better!

### Why do dogs behave like this?

Dogs are naturally social animals however there can still be many reasons why a dog might feel uncomfortable at the sight of another dog.

To develop social skills a puppy needs to be exposed to a variety of different dogs of all shapes, sizes and ages, so they learn the best way to communicate appropriately with all manner of dogs. Dog training classes that use canine science to underpin their instruction can help dogs learn how to behave appropriately in social situations.



Positive experiences with other dogs, in which a puppy learns how to politely greet and interact, and how to play appropriately, with another dog - as well as understanding when another dog is communicating that they would prefer *not* to play or interact at this particular point in time - prepare puppies to be able to cope with other dogs they encounter within their environment as they develop into adulthood.

For example, an older dog who is stiff and sore might not wish to play with a young, energetic dog and can communicate this in a polite way so that another dog, having had good experiences of positive social interaction, can respond entirely appropriately and respectfully leave him alone as he wishes. These types of social skills play an enormous role in enabling dogs to interact positively with other dogs within their local communities.

## \* Too little exposure to, or a very poor experience with, other dogs

However, some dogs might not have had such a positive 'puppy education' and simply might not have been exposed to a variety of different dogs. These dogs could be said to be lacking in social skills, simply because they haven't had the opportunity to learn how best to communicate.

Other dogs might have had a poor experience during an interaction with another dog, or group of dogs, in which they became frightened or overwhelmed.

This can make them feel vulnerable when they encounter dogs again. Unfortunately, this can happen at any point during a dog's life – so even a very well-socialised dog can become worried by other dogs if he has a traumatic experience, and this doesn't even have to involve physical contact as emotions alone can be very influential in how a dog behaves.

## \* Too much uncontrolled interaction with other dogs



On the other hand, there are some dogs who have had plenty of experience being able to interact with, and play with, other dogs as often as and whenever they have liked without any regulation. These dogs have been able to be extremely interactive with other dogs – to the point at which they now expect to be able to interact with every dog they come into contact with! This type of experience means that when they now encounter another dog and are unable to interact with them, whether they wish to interact or not – due to being on-lead and on a walk for example - they become frustrated and distressed as their expectation of being able to interact isn't realised.

They might not then understand when another dog doesn't want to interact or play with them and might continue to try to get the other dog to interact – sometimes even to the point at which the other dog just can't tolerate them any longer.

## So how does this explain the way dogs behave?

When dogs feel threatened (whether the threat is real or not) or frustrated, they might behave in any or all of the following ways:

- lunging forwards on-lead
- barking at the other dog
- growling/snarling/displaying teeth towards the other dog

- bouncing up and down on-lead
- grabbing their lead between their teeth and ragging it back and forth
- grabbing their owner's clothing or body
- nipping another dog they are being walked with
- pulling away
- trying to hide behind their owner or between their owner's legs
- trying to jump up into their owner's arms

**The behaviour of a fearful or anxious dog, towards another dog, is aimed at making them feel safe again** by increasing the distance between themselves and the dog who they perceive to be threatening. Their behaviour needs to be very visual and noisy, so it is clearly obvious to the other dog, hence lunging and barking. Where this behaviour results in the other dog moving away – which it inevitably will if the other dog is being walked along the other side of the road – then the dog learns that barking and lunging is successful.

This is why they'll behave that way again the next time they want to make another dog go away – the behaviour of lunging and barking is actually rewarding for the dog. They feel it's a good thing to do as it makes them feel safe!

Some worried and frightened dogs will try to increase the distance between themselves and the dog that is worrying them by running away and avoiding them all together. This can be dangerous as they might put themselves, and pull their owners behind them, into dangerous situations – some dogs might even run across roads to avoid other dogs for example. A worried dog who can't avoid another dog, because they might be on-lead for instance, might also be frustrated by this – so emotions can sometimes be mixed and complex!



**IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DOG WHO IS FRIGHTENED AND WANTS TO MAKE ANOTHER DOG GO AWAY, AND A DOG WHO IS FRUSTRATED AND REALLY WANTS TO INTERACT WITH ANOTHER DOG!**

**This dog is frustrated. She really wants to interact with the dog she is looking at but can't because of the lead and the distance between them. Unable to interact, she is rearing up and lunging towards the other dog and staring at it with her ears pricked forwards.**

**The behaviour of a frustrated dog who really wants to interact but can't is a visual and noisy expression of the way they are feeling inside!** They desperately want to be able to go straight over to the other dog to interact with them, however are unable to do so because they are on-lead. They can't behave as they wish, and some dogs whose expectations of being able to go and interact with the other dog are not met might jump up

and bark, lunge and pull towards the other dog; and might even redirect this feeling of frustration onto their own lead - by grabbing and shaking it, or even their owner – by jumping up and mouthing them.

## What can we do to help our dogs out when they're worried, fearful or frustrated?

### \* **Timing, routine and location – avoiding other dogs!**

Have a walk around your local area **without your dog** at various times of day to discover those times and places when you are less likely to encounter other dogs. If possible, create your daily routine around these quieter walking opportunities so that they encounter fewer dogs and are therefore avoiding as much as possible the triggers for this distressing behaviour. Remember the more they practice reacting to other dogs by barking and lunging, the stronger this behaviour is becoming and the more likely they are to do it every time they see another dog. Of course, it's not real life to imagine that they'll never see another dog again, but it will help to reduce the number of dogs they are being exposed to while trying to help them feel and behave differently when they are present.

### \* **Learn to recognise when your dog is starting to become aroused – whether worried or frustrated**

Although all dogs have the ability to use their bodies and vocalisations to express how they're feeling, your dog will have their own unique way of communicating. As dogs start to become worried about things within their environment they might initially show very subtle behaviours, such as licking their lips, yawning, or even turning their heads away and blinking. Dogs who are becoming excited – and are therefore likely to become frustrated if they can't interact with whatever they're excited about – might appear alert with ears pricked forwards, actively seeking out whatever has caught their attention. Our **Body Language** handout provides lots of detailed information about learning to 'read' your dog's communication.

If you can start to predict that your dog is becoming worried or aroused by something, then you can step in straight away to guide them back to calmness. Whatever the reason for their behaviour your aim is to maintain a calm, enjoyable walk. **Ask a friend to follow and film you walking your dog so that you can watch and learn how they change their body in response to things that are happening around them.** Our Body Language leaflet has lots of useful tips to help you understand your dog's communication.

### \* **Keep moving**

You might feel that simply stopping still, so your dog can see the other dog being led away, would help them realise they don't need to react in this way. However, because of the effect of the adrenaline and stress hormones pumping through their body when they are feeling this way, your dog is highly unlikely to be able to remain still so asking them or expecting them to do so might only add to their distress.



Instead, just calmly and quietly keep moving! Calmly and quietly lead them far enough away from the other dog so that they can start to relax. Letting them know that they can trust you to lead them to safety will help their confidence grow as they are learning to behave differently.

## **\* Remain calm yourself**

Staying calm is always a good example to set for your dog!

If your dog is anxious then staying calm helps them out by showing them that you are not worried by anything that might be approaching. This helps them trust that you are in control and can get him out of the danger they feel they are in.

If they are frustrated and jumping up or even mouthing you then remaining calm means you won't risk arousing them further or confusing them about your relationship. The sooner you can move him to a distance from the other dog at which their desire to go and interact with the other dog diminishes, the more relaxed they will become.

## **\* Keep the lead as loose as possible**

When dogs react this way to the sight of another dog, owners often themselves react by wrapping their leads tightly around their hands in order to shorten the lead-length and really feel connected to their dogs. However, this creates tension at the point where the lead attaches to either the dog's collar or harness – and this tension might result in them feeling the collar tighten around their neck, or the harness constrict around their chest, potentially making them panic. There is a risk that they might associate this constriction of their breathing with the approaching dog, which will only make matters worse for them longer term!

Ideally, keeping the lead loose – which might take some getting used to – means that the dog doesn't feel any restriction in their own movement so there is less risk of inadvertently increasing the severity of the situation for them.

## **\* Giving other dogs a wide berth**

When off-lead, with plenty of space and freedom to choose how to behave, dogs will often curve in a wide arc right around other unfamiliar dogs, giving each other a wide berth. They do so in order to avoid meeting the other dog directly head-on, which can be intimidating for them. However, when dogs are on lead they cannot perform this natural avoidance behaviour, and their options for responding are therefore limited – which is why some dogs will lunge or snap at other passing dogs when they're on lead, because they're unable to avoid the situation and need to behave in such a way that makes another dog avoid them instead!

Unfortunately, the way our pavements are organised means that owners often find themselves walking directly towards another dog and owner along the street, so unfamiliar dogs have little choice but to meet each other face to face.

Help your dog out if you can by giving the on-comers a wide berth by, when safe to do so, crossing over the road so you show them that they can still avoid the approaching dog under your guidance and control. Try

to do this before your dog starts to react to the approaching dog so they are getting out of the habit of simply reacting on sight.

### \* **Turn away**

You can also help your dog achieve the distance he needs between themselves and the on-coming dog by simply turning away from it and walking back along the street the way that you have come from. The aim is for you to turn them away **before they start to react, so as soon as you notice a dog** approaching, so that they don't react and instead practices a different, much calmer and safer behaviour.

This might be frustrating for you if you're under time pressure so make sure you plan your walks carefully to avoid other dogs if you're in a rush.

Turning away gives a clear signal to the other dog that your dog has no desire to engage or interact at all, and gives your dog the opportunity to turn away from a situation they find difficult. You can either walk a different way or cross over when you find a safe place to do so further away from the on-coming dog.

There will inevitably be times when you and your dog are taken by surprise and your dog reacts by lunging and barking, if this happens don't panic just keep moving your dog away to a safe distance at which they can relax and continue to turn away from other dogs when you do have the opportunity.

### \* **Reward quiet, calm behaviour and relaxation**

As soon as your dog has relaxed - and bear in mind this might initially be some distance away from the other dog - be sure to give them lots of praise. This should be something they really like, so it might be a fuss, some food or even a game with a much-loved toy – think about what they really enjoy! For example, if they especially like food, then take a tasty treat from your pocket/treat pouch to reward them with after a few more steps along the street away from the other dog. This way you are giving them something to focus on, demonstrating that they can trust you to lead them away from anything they might be worried about, and they will be getting rewarded for calmly turning away from another dog.

### \* **Distracting your dog so they don't notice other dogs - give them something better to focus on**

There might be times when you need to distract your dog so that you can manage the situation for them, buying yourself a little time. Practice scattering a handful of treats in the home, saying "treats" or "hoover-up" as you do, so that your dog has to put their nose to the ground and sniff them out to enjoy them. The more you repeat this game, you'll find that as soon as you start to say those words they'll start sniffing about, expecting a handful of treats to rain down for them to enjoy. You can then use this to distract them when you notice other dogs out and about – them sniffing about gives a clear sign to other dogs that they're busy and don't want to interact, and you'll have time to decide which way to turn to best avoid those dogs.

## \* Support in other areas of life

Anxious or fearful dogs might benefit from having their confidence built in other areas of their lives as well, as there may be things besides other dogs that upset them. Our Confidence in General and Confidence Outdoors leaflets might be useful!

Likewise, dogs that are easily frustrated, and struggle to control themselves when life becomes exciting for them, might benefit from training focused on teaching them to be patient and calm, even when they're especially excited.

**Despite our best efforts and understanding, some dogs sadly continue to struggle with the sight - or even sound or smell - of another dog!**

Professionally qualified and experienced behaviourists can create individually-tailored programmes for owners to follow to change their dog's behaviour. These plans aim to initially change the way a dog **feels** about other dogs, so they are no longer anxious, frightened or frustrated.

These resources have been created by Dogs Trust using the most up-to-date scientific-based understanding of dog behaviour and welfare needs and can be freely downloaded by anyone interested in learning more about understanding dog behaviour and training dogs.