

Chronicles of Oliver Part V—Leash Aggression/Closing Comments

Leash aggression with 23 lbs. of Poodle is a lot easier to handle than leash aggression with 120 lbs. of St. Bernard, but either way it's a serious problem that needs addressing. First, I think it's important to understand why many dogs respond negatively to other dogs (and sometimes people) on a leash. In most cases, the dog feels trapped. The dog knows that because of the leash there is no escape to whatever is approaching; therefore, the dog acts out with the hope of scaring away the perceived danger. Since other dogs walking with their humans walk on by and go away, the behavior is rewarded (the dog leaves) causing the behavior to escalate.

To work on this problem, start out by playing a game with your dog at home. It's called the "find it" game. Drop some small treats on the floor and tell the dog to "find it." Point to the treats if the dog doesn't see them at first. Praise the dog for finding and eating the treats. Repeat this game over and over being sure to say "find it" each time you drop the treats. Pretty soon your dog will begin to sniff the ground every time you say the words "find it." Now when you go out for a walk, bring the tastiest treats you have. Work far away from other dogs to start, and when the dogs come into view, drop treats on the ground *before* your dog has a chance to react, and say "find it." The hope is the dog will begin sniffing the ground looking for treats. You have just done two things to help your dog around other dogs. One, you have taught your dog proper body language, sniffing the ground, which means "I mean you no harm," in dog. The other dog is less likely to react negatively, and your dog will learn that other dogs aren't always a threat. The other step you have accomplished is that you have given your dog a job to do when other dogs are around. Instead of telling your dog "no" every time he jumps and lunges at other dogs, you are now redirecting the negative energy to a positive job sniffing and finding food. The key to playing this game in public is that you need to start far away from the other dogs so your dog feels safe, and you need to have good smelly treats. Close the gap between the dogs as your dog gains more confidence and is playing the "find it" game without hesitation.

Another option is to teach the dog to look up at you every time the dog feels threatened. To do this, have a tasty treat in your hand, put it in front of the dog's nose, and bring it up to your eye saying "look." Repeat this without distractions until your dog learns to look at you every time. Again when you take this to the streets, make sure the other dog is far away to start and slowly close the gap. You are also teaching your dog proper body language with this method since he is learning to look away from the other dog showing that he means the other dog no harm. The dog also is being given a job—look at you. It's helpful if you follow up the "look" with another cue to do something else—sit, down, stay. Don't forget the praise and reward.

I know with these methods some will say that you are rewarding the dog with food for negative behavior around other dogs. The idea is to try to interrupt the behavior *before* it happens. If your timing is off, it doesn't matter. Still waggle the smelly treat in front of your dog's nose, take a few steps backwards to get the dog to follow you, and praise and reward the dog for any movement away from the other dog. Oliver still needs treats as we work on his behavior around other dogs, and that's fine. He's made a lot of progress and quickly looks away from other dogs when asked to...most of the time. Different settings often mean starting over again, so don't get discouraged. Your dog may do well with the dog down the street, but then act out with an unfamiliar dog. Keep working on it, and one day you'll have a dog who can walk down the street without reacting to others.

I won't call this the "Final Chapter of the Chronicles of Oliver" as there is still so much work to do, but it's time to move on to other questions. As many of you have requested, there will be updates on Oliver's progress in the future. My hope in writing this series was to not only give solutions to common problems, but to also show there is no magic wand even for a trainer. Some problems take time, and sometimes new problems crop up. The other day we discovered that the sound of high heels on linoleum sets Oliver into a barking tizzy, so be aware if you wear high heels to Happy Tails on a Monday, you may be asked to toss treats to Oliver as you walk around the store! Keep in mind, too, that some dogs may have a chemical imbalance and may require medication while working on new skills. In Oliver's case, I believe his problems stem more from lack of experience and training rather than any type of physical brain issues. However, there are times I've considered looking into prescription drugs to help us through--either for Oliver or for me!