



## Handling on Leash Aggression

Perhaps one of the most embarrassing behavior problems is a dog who acts aggressively on leash, whether towards dogs, other animals or people. Often these dogs do not exhibit any aggression when off leash. Though puzzling, the difference between off leash and on leash behavior offers a clue to the problem as well as the solution. Recognize that on leash aggression always involves unintentional signals from the handler which create a vicious cycle. In the case of on leash aggression people typically make the situation worse without meaning to and the dog is simply responding to signals received from the handler.

### **My dog loves dogs, so why does she act aggressive on leash?**

At some point, usually in adolescence, the dog growls, barks, lunges at or snaps at a dog or person. The handler is surprised and embarrassed, and not sure what to do. If the person does not take action to proactively manage introductions the dog may continue to practice this behavior and it gets worse over time. Understandably, the handler begins to anticipate any situation which might trigger this behavior so when spotting an approaching dog or person before the dog does, s/he tightens up on the leash so s/he can control the dog better. At the same time, s/he stiffens their body posture and changes their breathing. The dog at the other end of the leash begins looking to see what has his person so worried, and once he spots it, begins his aggressive behavior.

### **What you can do**

- **Train!** Take the time to teach your dog *impulse control* and basic manners that you can reinforce. Make a point to watch for when he does something good so that you can reinforce that behavior.
- **Be alert to the earliest signs.** No dog spends his entire life in an aggressive state. Learn what body language your dog exhibits when he is calm and relaxed. Then watch what changes occur as he moves into a more aggressive mood. Watch for changes in ears, head and neck carriage, eye shape and expression, mouth and whisker changes, tail carriage and overall posture. Intervention at the first sign of a problem is more successful than trying to deal with the full blow up.

- **Redirect the dog's attention.** By giving a cue he knows in a cheerful, upbeat tone, you can redirect the dog's attention back to working with you. If possible, change direction and move away from the situation all the while talking to your dog in a sing song voice to keep his attention and communicate that everything is okay.
- **Change the body posture = change the mental state.** Body language is nothing more than an external expression of an internal state. It is possible to change an emotional state by changing body posture and vice versa. This is why the advice to "Stand up straight, smile and you'll feel better" actually works! In the case of aggression, imagine how hard it would be to be angry if you were sitting in a comfortable chair with your face and head relaxed.

**We Can Help!** The Training and Behavior Department at the Humane Society of Western Montana has a variety of resources available to help you and your pets live in harmony! The Humane Society has several dog trainers and a behaviorist on staff to provide affordable group and private training lessons and free behavior consultations.

- Contact Jean, our Behaviorist for a free pet behavior consultation by emailing [behavior@myhswm.org](mailto:behavior@myhswm.org) or calling the Behavior Helpline at (406) 549-9295.
- Contact Mariah, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer, to inquire about private lessons or a group training class. Email [outreach@myhswm.org](mailto:outreach@myhswm.org) or call (406) 549-HSWM.
- Check out our website at [www.myhswm.org](http://www.myhswm.org) for a complete listing of dog classes, rates and additional information.