

Dog Reactivity

Aggression is a very poorly understood dog behavior in general. It is very complex, comes from many different things, has many different levels and is expressed by all breeds. Aggression can seem general or specific, and specific aggression does not necessarily mean the dog has general aggression. For example, a dog may show aggression when its nails are trimmed but show aggression at no other time in its life.

Root of Aggression

Aggression most often comes from fear; confident dogs don't act aggressively because they do not worry and don't need to threaten or act aggressively. Aggression can also manifest from frustration, over-stimulation, negative associations, and many other factors. Frustration manifesting as aggression can be because of a barrier (e.g. fence) and even sometimes on a leash. But this is not a hard and fast rule. Leash frustration can also be a manifestation of poor handling by the person or bad associations from other times on lead. Thus, one behavior can have different causes in different dogs.

Dog Reactivity

One issue that commonly arises around pit bull type dogs is dog-on-dog aggression or reactivity to other dogs. There is a myriad of writings and advice on the topic covering the gambit, from nature to nurture. The truth is somewhere in the middle. The most important thing to understand is that it is unsafe to set rules and boundaries for a dog based on blanket statements made about "breed."

The "Pit Bull"

The term "pit bull" is so over-applied today and so many different mixes, mutts and breeds get lumped into one "breed" or "type" that it borders on asinine to make blanket behavior statements about them. Behavior varies within lines, types, and breeds, let alone across the broad spectrum of dogs called "pit bulls."

The best rule is to treat each dog as an individual and set its rules and boundaries according to the dog's unique behaviors and temperament. Some organizations and websites recommend the "precautionary principle" when it comes to "pit bulls" and other specific breeds. This principle is to not let your dogs interact, not socialize your dog, never leave your dog alone with another dog, among other things – better safe than sorry...at all costs. You very well may have a dog that shows some form of dog reactivity and you may need to limit his interactions with other dogs accordingly. But you also may have a dog that is capable of being with other dogs and have a blast in social situations with other dogs. If you exercise the "precautionary principle" and keep your dog isolated and unsocialized, you may create the very thing you fear. A little socialization and positive interactions with other dogs may have helped that "pit bull" become a balanced, happy and social dog.

The Social Bully

There are varying levels of dog social skills and dog reactivity. Understanding which ones apply to the dog(s) in your household can help to understand how to set up your dog(s) to succeed. It is not

uncommon for a dog to evolve across this spectrum as it grows up, matures and grows old. Changes most commonly occur at sexual maturity, but sometimes when they become “senior” dogs, their quality of life can affect their dog-to-dog interactions (in other words, they can sometimes be cranky old dogs). *(Some of these terms are borrowed from BAD RAP: www.badrap.org):*

Openly Social: Enjoys interacting and playing with other dogs as well as mutual down time. Trustworthy in most-to-all situations even when another dog is acting aggressively. These dogs are not fearful in situations with other dogs and do not react to instigatory or fearful/defensive behavior in the pack. They are good with socially awkward dogs and tolerant of all behaviors within reason. These dogs can be good to help fearful dogs learn to interact with other dogs because they teach the best body language and social skills. They can also be good with dominant, pushy and reactive types because they will not react negatively and escalate a tense situation. They have a positive effect on a pack dynamic, and can be the “exception” that dogs with lower tolerance levels can get along with.

Dog Tolerant: (This term is borrowed from BAD RAP) This can range from stoic ignoring to “one eyebrow up” reluctant acceptance. These are dogs that don’t really care if another dog is around or not, or if they do care a little but aren’t really willing to do anything about it. They are rarely instigators in a pack environment, but they will have a lower threshold and might be slightly more reactive either from annoyance or fear. It is common for these dogs also to have one dog or a tight-knit group of dogs that it feels a little more at ease with and will interact with more playfully. Its “tolerant,” but not openly social, attitude can come from genuinely not caring about the company of other dogs, or it can also come from an anxiety or discomfort about being with other dogs, or from simply having little patience for doggie tomfoolery. In the final two cases, trust building and familiarity can help to improve its social skills.

Dog Selective: (This term is borrowed from BAD RAP) Dog selective is a broad term that covers more than one specific category. Quite simply, these dogs get along with some dogs, and don’t with others. The reasons for this vary and we will get into some main ones in the sub categories below. This term applies when you can predict that your dog will do poorly in a given situation. Whether the dog is good with 90% of dogs or 10% or dogs, when it consistently fails with certain dogs or in certain situations, that pattern of behavior shows that it is selective in its social interactions, even if you have difficulty determining exactly what those parameters are. There are many dogs of many breeds that show dog selective tendencies. It is probably the most common category. These are the most common types of dog selective behavior seen by Game Dog Guardian Professional Staff:

Pack Selective: These are dogs that get along with dogs they are familiar with only. They need a slow and deliberate introduction to dogs they don’t know, but once they are familiar they are openly social with their pack mates.

These dogs can simply be reactive to unfamiliar dogs or can be openly hostile and aggressive toward them.

Energy Selective: These are dogs that only do well with certain energy and body language from other dogs. Some of these need to be with submissive dogs, or confident dogs, or calm dogs. These dogs can be openly hostile towards energy they do not like. They can attack submissive dogs for being fearful or they can attack hyper dogs for being too energetic. The dynamic of this dog with other dogs is complex, but usually relaxes a little with familiarity and trust.

Gender Selective: Simply don't get along with dogs of the same gender.

Size Selective: Some dogs are only comfortable with dogs that are bigger or smaller than they are. Reasons for this can vary.

Grudge Selective: Some dogs have one or a few dogs they just don't get along with. For whatever reason they have a negative association with a specific dog or dogs but are fine with other dogs.

Space/Number Selective: Some dogs will be comfortable interacting with another dog or maybe even two or three other dogs. But as the pack increases in size and the space decreases in size, the dog can become uncomfortable and reactive. He does best in small groups, and his reactions seem to come from the size of the pack not from the dogs so the specific dogs he is with may or may not matter. The opposite can also happen. While this is a lot less common, some dogs do worse with one or two dogs for them to "focus" on and do better in a larger pack setting.

Dog Aggressive: Doesn't get along with other dogs...period. This dog just likes to be alone in home with its human family. This can range from a passive reactivity that will not manifest unless it is in close quarters with another dog, to a dog that will actively seek out any dog within its sensory parameters, or anywhere in between those two extremes. An actively and persistently reactive dog is not very common.

This is not breed specific, nor is this a sliding scale.

*A dog can either be openly social or dog aggressive,
but everything in between can vary in its degree of severity.*