

HANDLING UNRULY BEHAVIOR IN DOGS

Dogs that display unruly behavior may jump up on you, launch themselves at your face, grab your sleeves or pant legs, play tug with their leashes, and/or playfully bite or mouth your arms to the point of leaving bruises or breaking skin. This behavior is often seen in frustrated and anxious shelter dogs, but there are several factors that make some dogs more likely to show these behaviors than others. For instance, dogs that did not learn proper bite inhibition during their early experiences in the litter, dogs with a history of roughhousing with people, and dogs with inadequate training and socialization with people may be more likely to engage in unruly behavior. There are several strategies you can try with your dog to reduce your dog's unruly behavior.

Teaching Self Control

- Teach your dog to sit before getting anything he wants – before petting, greeting, leashing, opening the door, playing, putting down the food bowl, giving a treat. This will be his way of saying please.
- Your dog will need to learn that rude behavior will not get him what he wants (e.g., attention, play, access to toys, etc.). One way to discourage this behavior is by turning your back to the dog, crossing your arms, and avoiding eye contact. Once he is calm, you can engage with him again.
- Have your dog drag his leash inside the house and outside. If he starts jumping or mouthing, step on the leash or hold it out with a straight arm. Alternatively, you can hook a carabiner to the handle of the leash so that if he begins mouthing, you can tether him to a solid, sturdy object (e.g., a fence, around a pole, etc.) and walk out of reach. Once he settles down, you can engage with him again, but if he starts getting amped up again, step away. Repeat until he is calm.

Redirection

- You may notice certain patterns in your dog's behavior that will help you anticipate when the unruly behavior is about to start. It might be a look in his eyes, a particular location, time of day, activity, or thing in the environment that brings out this behavior. Be prepared so that you can redirect your dog before one of these unruly episodes begins. Have treats on you or in different rooms in your house so that when you sense your dog is about to become unruly, you can divert his attention by asking for default commands (e.g., sit, lay down) and toss treats away from yourself so he's focused on something other than you.
- Be sure to not accidentally reward your dog for unruly behavior. If your timing is off and you start giving the dog treats once he has already started jumping on and mouthing you, he will quickly learn that when he gets unruly, he gets treats! That will make him more likely to engage in these behaviors in the future and make the behavior more difficult to break. Look for those early precursors to the unruly behavior and redirect his attention *before* he has the opportunity to get amped up.

Appropriate Play - Tug of War

- Avoid any roughhousing, wrestling, or play that allow your dog to put his mouth on you. This will make it difficult for your dog to distinguish between appropriate play and inappropriate play.
- Tug of war can be a great outlet for your dog's energy, but it is important to play by the rules:
 1. You (not the dog) initiate the game by having the dog wait for permission to grab the toy. While your dog is in a sit, use a verbal cue, such as "Tug!" or "Okay!" to start the game. If the dog starts before you give the cue, put the toy behind your back and say "Oops!". After a few seconds, try again.

2. Teach your dog the cue "Give!" or "Release!" by exchanging for something else, like another toy or treat, then reinitiate the game as you did in step 1. Take several trade breaks to solidify this cue.
3. If your dog refuses to give up the toy or his teeth make contact with your skin or clothes, end the game by saying "Oops, time out!" and ignore the dog. If the dog drops the toy, pick it up and hide it behind your back or set it out of reach. This teaches your dog that the fun stops when he doesn't drop on command or his teeth make contact, plus it gives him some time to calm down before starting the game up again.
4. Whenever possible, end each game on a good note and reward your dog by giving him a treat and praise.

Physical and Mental Exercise

- Ensure your dog is getting enough physical exercise through playing fetch, going for walks or runs, and playing with other dogs (if able to). If your dog gets unruly while on walks, exercise and play with him in the yard to tire him out before taking your walk.
- Your dog needs mental exercise just as much as he needs physical exercise! Provide mental stimulation by playing searching games, like searching out kibble tossed on the floor, patio, or in the grass, or giving your dog puzzles, feeder toys, snuffle mats, and other interactive toys. You can make many of these items yourself or purchase them.

Management Techniques

- For dogs that bite or play tug with their leashes, consider using a chain leash (note, this is *not* the same as a choke chain or chain collar) to deter your dog from putting his teeth on the leash. Most dogs do not like the feeling of metal on their teeth and will quickly learn this game is not fun anymore. Another option is to slip a PVC pipe over the leash, which can also deter leash biting for the same reasons. For some dogs, the solution may be as simple as giving him a toy to carry while on the walk.
- Head halters are a tool you can use to prevent your dog from grabbing at you. These devices allow you to control the dog's head, so you can use the leash to direct the dog's head away from you. However, many dogs find head harnesses aversive, so it is important to introduce the head halter slowly and gradually while using treats so he learns it is a wonderful thing.
- Training your dog to wear a basket muzzle is a final option for dogs with little control over their mouths. Basket muzzles allow dogs to open their mouths, drink, and even eat while still preventing them from biting. Like a head halter, a basket muzzle needs to be introduced with the same conditioning process so they learn the muzzle is a good thing.

A Warning about Physical Methods of Correction and Punishment

- Methods such as kneeling the dog in the chest, squeezing between the dog's paw pads, or grasping the dog's muzzle or scruff will likely only make your dog's unruly behavior worse. Many dogs see these behaviors as playful and their unruly behavior will only escalate.
- Verbally or physically punishing your dog for these behaviors can also backfire. Yelling, hitting, hanging by the leash, using methods that involve 'asserting dominance' like 'alpha rolling' or pinching the dog's ear, or resorting to prong or shock collars will in almost every case cause physical, emotional, and/or psychological damage to your dog.
- Not only can punishment methods damage your relationship with your dog, causing him to be fearful of you, your dog may begin to anticipate being punished and start displaying defensive aggression. Additionally, your dog will be less willing to offer new, desirable behaviors because he is anticipating punishment, and because you are not teaching your dog an appropriate behavior to replace his unruly behavior, he'll likely fill that behavior with another undesirable one.

Animal behavior questions?

Contact our FREE Behavior Helpline!

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