

Attacking Other Dogs

Aggressive Miniature Schnauzer attacks other dogs.

By September B. Morn

Q. I recently adopted a 3-year-old Miniature Schnauzer named Jack from a rescue. Jack was the nicest dog for the first two weeks, but he has become very aggressive toward other dogs. I don't understand this because he was living with nine other dogs at the rescue and he was the nicest dog in the house. He has become such a nightmare I don't even like to take him for a walk because he attacks any dog he sees. Please help me — I'm thinking of taking him back to the rescue shelter.

A. When nine dogs live together, a hierarchy forms and everyone knows where they stand in the pecking order. When Jack lived at the foster home he had to act "nice" to get along with the dogs that had already claimed their territory there and ranked higher than him. He may not have been happy with his position in that pack, but he knew where he stood. When he got to your home he was the only dog, which automatically made him No. 1. When he meets other dogs on walks his top-dog position comes into question, so he switches into tough-guy mode.

Jack's dramatic snarling and lunging behavior looks and sounds horrible, but it isn't necessarily a show of courage. In fact, often that kind of blustery, overdramatic display of aggression can be a façade that covers a dog's lack of confidence. It's possible that Jack behaves aggressively because he's actually afraid of dogs he doesn't know and acts tough to keep them away.

Whatever the reason for Jack's aggressive display, you can help him learn there's no need to act so fierce. Ask your veterinarian to refer you to a dog trainer in your area who uses non-punishment methods to work with dog-reactive dogs like Jack. Some trainers hold special classes for reactive dogs and others work with them privately, using their own trained dogs to gradually desensitize the reactive dog to others.

You can also do some work with Jack yourself, desensitizing him to other dogs using classical conditioning (think Pavlov) to change the emotions he feels when he sees other dogs. Do this three or four times a week, for about 15 or 20 minutes. Find a spot where you and Jack can watch other dogs from a distance that's far enough from them that he doesn't feel stressed enough to react aggressively. When a dog comes into view, start feeding Jack his favorite treats. Continue feeding until the other dog is out of sight, then stop and wait for another dog to appear. Start feeding treats one after another until that dog is gone, and wait for another one.

If Jack reacts at the first distance, barking and lunging or refusing the treats, that indicates you're too close to the other dogs, so move farther away and try again. As Jack improves, move closer to the other dogs in tiny increments. This conditioning process will work well in conjunction with one-on-one help from an experienced trainer.