

What is lunging?

LARGE PRINT VERSION

21 March 2021



This isn't lunging! The pup is happy- check out her soft mouth and relaxed face.

We hear this word a lot, *usually connected to an accusation of a dog being 'aggressive'*. Our blog on 'aggression' makes it quite clear that saying a dog is 'aggressive' is a human interpretation of dog's behaviour when really it is a case of *the HUMANS not picking up on their low level stress*



Is this dog stressed? Turning away from fuss may mean they have had enough today..

so they don't TRUST you any more to know when they are upset so go straight to growling and even nipping because you aren't looking at your dog properly.



This is the face of a dog who loves you and is focused on you.

So unsurprisingly, 'lunging' is also a human-focused word to 'explain' (badly) a dog who is

- **wanting to play**
- **(over) excited or curious**
- **OR worried, scared, or reacting**

Why is your pup reacting? Because **they want you to show them everything is ok, or want a job to do and aren't being given the right jobs or reassurance.**

usually

- **when on a lead on walk**
- **or when they can hear things or hear/see visitors come to the home who they don't trust**

they will push forwards, trying to make themselves look big and

*scary. It's actual a natural dog behaviour to want to guard and protect their humans **BUT beware! Incorrect decompression always leads to them reacting this way because they have fear bonded with you.***

So here are the different types of reactivity in more detail:

Chase based

This is usually but not always comes from them **wanting to play** and most of the time they have no intention of harming what they are chasing. The pup seems to 'not be able to help themselves' when they see a squirrel, bird, cat or other dogs for example. It can transfer to humans on bikes or motorbikes, even cars and bigger vehicles too. As a dog adopter, *it is up to you to work out if this is 'just' chase play or evidence your dog is stressed.* You as the human need to keep an eye out for when your pup gets their 'squirrel head' on, too, and prepare to grab up that long training lead (at a distance, don't pull at their heads or collars) , or clip them back on if completely off lead- and **distract** with something else like a walking toy or even a treat if they're food led. *Try not to fuss too much or give that treat though till they are visibly calmer and keep your voice light and happy.*

*And **don't just look at their heads- their tails can give the game away.** Luckily you have a full tail view on walk (unless you are doing controlled walking or 'heel' training.) A fast wagging tail straight up or out like a flag is usually a good sign, and even better if the tail starts to wag more on the right- but left wagging can be a sign the dog is not sure or trying to show they are the dominant dog.*

- **Tail held high and still-** your pup is alert alert or wants to show dominance.
- **Tail held high** and wagging shows **happiness** but also a state of **alertness**. The dog is cautiously excited but showing dominance.
- **Tail held between the legs** indicates fear or submission.

- **Tail held straight out** means that the dog is taking in new information and is so far responding neutrally.
- **Tail held on the left or (slow) wagging to the left**- unsure, may be showing low level stress.
- **Tail wagging to the right** means a dog is feeling pleasant and is encountering something or someone known to him.

Fast or slow?

Up or down?

Left or right?



Check out this lovely pup! If you met this pup on a walk for the first time, what could you look at to see what 'mood' they might be in?

This 'what's the tail doing' can be a handy check list especially for new walks, till it becomes second nature to you as well. But again, one size does not fit all and your pup may have some unique tail signals of their own!

Dog Tail Translation



Alert and excited



Neutral and exploring



Submissive and concerned



Concerned or unpleasant about person or animal



Excited



Happier



Pleasant about person or animal



Less enthusiastic



Anxious or uptight

Joy based

This one is evidence of dogs just being **curious**, They may run forwards, tail up and ears perked in some way usually, to investigate this amazing new smell, animal or experience.



Check out the investigating stuff lean and the flag tail!

Watch your dog! The body language- is it positive or are they stressed by this new experience? If they are showing stress body language, again get ready to clip them back on a lead if off lead and if already on a lead, back off with a loose lead and watch them relax when they feel they are at a 'safe' distance to investigate this new thing. **DO NOT pull the lead tight, slowly and gently lead away or round at a distance**, without turning your back or retracing your route unless the walk gives you no choice, on whatever it is that has stressed the dog.

Defence based

This is **the one in three chance** humans always assume dogs are doing- which says far more about humans than dogs. But we can't discount it as dogs WILL defend you in a way that is actually causing them stress if decompression was incorrectly done, as *their defence of you comes from a fear response*. **Check YOUR body language** when visitors come,

or you encounter people and other pets on walks- how tight are you holding the lead? *Tension can and does communicate down the lead* to your dog, so do not tighten that lead or pull the pup away.



This pup is not happy at all. They are stressed by the new situation(s) AND the fact that their human doesn't seem to know what to do either.

The big clue is when they *suddenly start to react to noises and other stimuli in the home let alone when out and about that before they tolerated or ignored it.* Noise sensitivity can be reduced by controlling the noise in your home, keep a radio on low for the first few weeks even overnight. The more they hear happy friendly human voices (especially English ones, some pups do well listening to a mix of English and Romanian stations too) the less likely they will respond in a **fear based** way to another new voice in the home or when out and about. If your pup is new you are still learning them, so when they 'find their voice' keep a very careful eye on how your pup is decompressing.

if you train your dog to have 'strong' commands, this will

- cut through their worry,
- or take over their 'need' to invent their job to do for you because they don't have one and it's stressing them out.

Have special words or sounds for walks- and make sure they are words and sounds you don't usually use- for sit, down and wait when on a walk so *the dog knows when you are being serious*. Some people use words like 'headquarters' or 'home' or 'enough' to tell the dog to reset to chilled home mode, or 'away' or 'safe space' (while the human walks to a safe place to show the dog where to follow), or a special nickname for walks so they know what 'mode' to be in on walks, which by necessity is different to their 'house mode'. However, you can start doing this in the home and garden till they know what their 'job' is on a walk using leads-like slip leads, and longer and longer training leads. **They will then know you have control of the situation and calm down much faster.**

- use your body language to reinforce your commands as ***dogs rely as much on non verbal as they do verbal communication***
- point to things and describe them in simple words and a happy voice, ask them what it is as if it's going to be fun
- use your hands like sign language to back up your words
- have different tones for different things you want your pup to do as their 'job'.
- ***DO NOT walk your dog till they recall with their special commands. Even if this takes weeks or more.***

These special commands and jobs need to be second nature to them.

- Or get them to give you their paw if they like that sort of 'job'- this will focus them back on you and reduce stress.



Giving a paw can make a pup focus back on you- their place of safety.

They usually have to sit down to give a paw, or at least shift their balance from leaning forwards suspiciously to a more neutral stance, and for a dog, sit usually means there's no threat. Again, no treats until they have visibly calmed down. *But again, don't leave it to the walks to try these out, make sure your dog knows what they are doing off by heart first.*

Don't snatch your pup up every time another dog comes along. Especially commonly done by people with small dogs, this a nightmare scenario ready to play out.

No matter how your dog is reacting, you getting 'nervous' next time or reducing their daily experiences will only make it worse as they'll never get used to new things that way. So you as their human need to communicate with your dog, in a way that they believe, that this new thing isn't going to hurt you, or them.

You may well have to take the home to 'safety' and cut the walk short the first few times, but dragging your pup back to the car won't help. Control the experience, associate it with positive voice and tone, and do not hurry away!

But the root of this behaviour in all three cases is excitement that can overwhelm them due to lack of processing time, not aggression. The only time the dog is showing anything we should call aggression however is often when it's 'too late' and the dog that the owner swears is friendly has just attacked your new, already a bit nervous pup. All 'owners' are not created equal and all you can do is ensure you know your dog, and when they can and can't be let off lead- *be alert.*

Every single issue a dog may have, is usually based in a flaw in the dog's training, usually down to the human's (lack of) knowledge or attitude, which can be magnified to very unhealthy levels due to incorrect decompression.

Other reasons that are common in creating a 'reactive' dog:

1. Under/inappropriate socialisation – often the main reason why a dog resorts to barking and rushing forwards whenever they meet new dogs. *Or if from rescue, can associate lots of dogs with noise and stress. They are so unused to other pups or used to being on their guard with other dogs about they assume the dog coming into their space does not have good intentions till they are thoroughly checked out, and in some cases seen off (this could also be jealousy and may be trying to attract your attention back to them. It's their walk after all!)*



Play with me! This reassures your pup that they are your number one dog.

This can happen with a rescue pup or a pup from a breeder. An under-socialised pup will have *suspect body language* to other dogs and this can make both dogs highly nervous. If you do not socialise your dog, and put the barking down to 'being a pup' or 'high spirits' you are making it worse and giving them permission to behave like this. So if they work out that they can get away with it when they are on a lead, this enforces the negative behaviour. Dogs that are chilled at home but 'turn into' growly pups on walks have been badly let down by their humans, and those humans may not have been you! But it can be resolved with **gentle but firm positive behaviour reinforcement to show them healthy human-dog dynamics.**

2. Frustrations- you may be increasing your dog's stress levels without knowing. Your pup may know lots of other dogs at home and when out, and spend a lot of time playing with other pups. However, if you have had your pup on a lead before and allowed them to **pull towards another dog** whenever they want to say hi, then this could encourage 'lunging'- you are training them to think that's how they should introduce themselves to new dogs.

3. Inconsistency- It could also be because ***you've changed the rules and they don't know why***- you may have noticed them grumbling a bit when new dogs are about and want *avoid more experiences like this*. But this does the dog no favours, they will only get more overwhelmed by the new experiences if you never show them any. So if you used to let your dog say hi to other dogs but don't know, then your pup may want to say hi to a new dog that they encounter but get frustrated when you do not allow them to. This could cause barking and 'lunging' showing you they do not understand your new rule.



What is this pup trying to tell you? Whatever it is, he wants your help in finding the answer.

4. Fight or flight – dog 'owners' sometimes **reduce a dog's space** to try and make them less 'reactive' like always locking them behind a pet gate or fence. This is *good during decompression and first introductions to resident pets and kids*,

more to protect the new dog, (but slowly expand that world so they can process each room your home they can go in at their own pace) so they can take all the time they need to get to know this new thing, but don't keep them behind this if they're not stressed- as they can never go and check the other dog out, so they get frustrated and stressed. Other 'owners' put them outside too much, or put them on a lead outside and leave them out there to calm down, sometimes for hours. Yes of course sometimes dogs need hours to process something new but not like this! So please do not do it! **Dogs need their pack and their pack's approval** and they will have no clue why you are doing this, so they start to feel you do not love them. without your guidance and presence when they are stressed outside like this, if they saw a new dog, going past through the hedge, say, or could hear a lot of 'nice things' or 'worrying things' happening in the house they can't check out, they will feel stressed and may want the other dog or noise to go away. Consequently, since flight is no longer an option, the dog learns that barking and lunging works to bring the human out- usually to yell at them to shush. But ***negative attention is still attention***, so this is a massive no no.

5. Poor training- many people are unaware they are **following inappropriate training methods or advice for their dog**- one approach does not fit all dogs! Or they may not bother to keep their knowledge up to date, or think they know better- using methods they learned with their family dog years ago that simply do not work with this pup. Whenever the dog encounters an unfamiliar dog and gets excited, some owners use very negative ways to try and get their dog to calm down such as a

- choke chain,
- yelling at
- or even hitting the dog.

Consequently, the dog resorts to barking and 'lunging'- because you are not seeing, or worse you are ***punishing*** their low level stress reactions- even more, to get the new dog/

experience to go away to **reduce the unpleasant experience which in their mind has been caused by the new dog or event, *and you!***

It takes only minutes for the humans to compound the problem- a problem it can take months and more to fix, so do right by your pup and

- make sure you 'learn' them,
- spot their low level distress early,
- and use **consistent, firm yet gentle, and reward based** methods.

Of course it's not easy to both ignore 'bad' behaviour while keeping an eye on their body language- but humans are totally capable of doing many things at the same time with a little training ;)

- **ALWAYS double lead** your dog on their first few walks even after you've bonded properly with your pup- they can escape and be gone in seconds even if it is excitement and not fear or stress. This can be one light lead on the collar and a sturdy one on the harness. (And don't expect a dog to allow a harness or new collar or lead to the ones they are used to on just like that- this will need training too, long before they go out of the door on their first walk.)



There are lots of harnesses out there. Not all will suit your pup's dimensions or temperament. But a double lead gives you that extra bit of security when first out and about.

- **ALWAYS** have your dog on the lead in the garden, if they are comfortable with it- and carry on doing it till you feel they are leaving second stage decompression. If they find leads a bother in the garden, you have a lot more training to do before they are walk ready.
- Have a **spare lead** in your pocket in case the worst happens and the lead(s) is/are pulled out of your hands.
- and above all **DO NOT RUSH to walk your dogs**. Few of them know what a walk even is yet, so they're not missing anything. Wait till **AT LEAST** you feel they are entering third stage decompression and they know all their command

words.

- do not start to walk your dog till they know not to pull on a lead
- always consider your pup may not be well, or be carrying an injury you can't see; they can and do hide pain though some breeds can't tolerate pain at all, like horses.
- always consider there may be something neurological (brain activity issues) going on
- always consider the **breed mix of your dog**- humans have bred some dogs to skip the lower stress stages and go straight to attack so do your research! Some dogs feel better with a muzzle, horrible though they look, but these possibilities are usually rare.

Also some things to think about-

This is a partnership.

When do YOU 'lunge'? (We can quite assure you that you 'lunge' too!)

Have you ever reached out to touch something that says 'don't touch' on?

How quickly do you get your plate full at the all you can eat buffet?

How do you feel when someone pushes in the queue in front of you, or cuts you up in the car?

How do you feel if someone takes food off the plate you are eating, or turns the TV over when you're watching your favourite show? How do you deal with it?

How do you hug people (or not), or show you are pleased to see someone-do you back off, or move towards them?

How do you say hi to fellow humans or other pets in the home, or on walks?

Are you mirroring your dogs frustration and behaviour, because you're embarrassed they've 'acted out' in public?

How well have you learned that while dogs and humans go back a long way, they have developed from wolves and they do have teeth!?

Don't forget, humans are affected by the culture they grow up in

too so fear of dogs as well as poor training of dogs can also be learned from the adults around you without even realising it.

Would you want to be labelled 'aggressive' for just acting naturally? Of course not, so why do it to your dog?

Not only being more aware of [why you do things can help your dog](#), but *your dog could also be copying you!* If you

- **grab** at them,
- not give them any **body autonomy**, like picking them up too much,
- or **overloading** with fuss, treats out toys (yes! You can give your dog too many toys)
- **don't let them process** and so on,

they think that's what you are supposed to do to be a good dog for you.

This site is a very good guide for lava dogs or kettle dogs if they start showing stress on walks but not at home <https://www.brilliantfamilydog.com/blog/dog-barking-lunging-dogs>

The BBC are rerunning an excellent show on how we bond (or don't) with our pups in a way that just doesn't help the pups, using a series of challenges and fascinating psychology- and how to improve our relationship with 'man's best friend' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08lnlqg>

Blog written by Lora's Luck Ltd
All citations provided. All rights reserved.

