

Understanding Reactivity in Dogs

Reactivity is not aggression. Aggression means intent to do harm and though reactivity can look aggressive in nature when your dog is barking and lunging on leash, there is no intention to do harm. Many reactive dogs live well with other dogs or play well at dog parks, because reactivity is just your dog reacting to a specific stimulus. Dogs can be reactive to a variety of different stimuli like people, other dogs, and bicycles.

There are many different reasons for reactivity and different levels of intensity. Because reactivity is so complex, we recommend that you get professional in-home help from an animal behavior specialist if your dog is displaying any reactive behavior. Phone consultations, including our Behavior Helpline can give you tips on how to manage the reactivity but to completely resolve the behavior, an animal behavior specialist is recommended (see our handout: “When the Behavior Helpline Can’t Help”).

Why Reactivity Occurs:

Frustration: Some dogs, if restrained by a barrier, like a leash or fence, can become aroused or excited at the sight of a person, dog, or object. For example, when your dog is on leash and tries to pull towards a specific stimulus, they are met with tension from the leash, which leads to frustration and escalates the behavior to reactivity.

Fear: Some dogs become fearful at the sight of a person, dog, or object. This may be the result of a specific scary experience that occurred in your dog’s life or due to the lack of socialization. Either way, as the person, dog, or object gets closer, your dog is unable to leave due to the leash, which then forces your dog to face the specific stimulus, causing reactivity.

Learned behavior: When some dogs see a stimuli, like a person, dog, or object and proceed to approach but are met with an aversive, like being pulled back on the leash, they may begin to associate the jerk on leash to the people, dogs, or objects. This results in them reacting to the stimuli when first seen, which often results in more tension on the leash and over time an escalation in behavior to reactivity.

What You Can Do

- Teach your dog some redirection behaviors like target and “watch me” (see our handout: “Dog Clicker Training”). Once your dog knows some of these behaviors, use them to redirect his attention when reacting.
- Start training your dog at a distance he doesn’t react to the stimuli and build up to being closer to the person, dog, or object that causes him to react. If you move closer and your dog starts to react, then you have moved too close too fast. The idea is to only move when your dog is not reacting at that distance.
- Using treats and praise, reinforce appropriate and calm behaviors when your dog is around a specific stimulus and doesn’t react.
- Avoid exposing your dog to situations where he is more likely to show reactivity. For instance avoid walking your dog at times of the day when you know there will be many other people and dogs out.



- If in a situation where your dog is reacting and you are unable to redirect, gently lead your dog away from the situation.
- Spay or neuter your dog.

What Not To Do

- Do not punish. Punishment won't help and, in fact, will make the problem worse. If the reactivity is motivated by fear, punishment will make your dog more fearful, and could lead to aggression. Attempting to punish or physically restrain a reactive dog may cause him to escalate his behavior and is likely to result in a bite or a severe attack.
- Do not pull back on the leash when your dog is reacting. Same is true if you know your dog will react; do not tighten up on the leash before a person or another dog gets closer.
- Do not leave your dog unattended outside for long periods of time.