



## **Working with and Managing Reactivity in Dogs**

### **Understanding Reactivity**

Reactivity refers to an animal seemingly overresponding to a stimulus in the environment. The behaviors often seen when a dog is being reactive include, but are not limited to barking, growling, displaying teeth, pulling towards, lunging and/or snapping at or towards something in the environment. In dogs, we most frequently see reactivity happen towards moving objects, other dogs and people. Some dogs have multiple triggers while others have more specific triggers, such as seeing other dogs pass their house or seeing a person on a walk.

Reactivity can happen for a variety of reasons. In some cases, reactivity can be based out of frustration due to the dog's inability to access the trigger when on leash or behind a barrier (also known as barrier frustration). For others, they may be reacting out of fear and are using these behaviors to create distance between themselves and the trigger. We see this most commonly when a dog is in a situation where they would otherwise be unable to escape, such as in a kennel or on a leash. Regardless of why your dog is displaying reactivity, there are many things that you can do to help work on and manage this issue.

Though the presence of these behaviors does not necessarily mean that the dog is inherently aggressive, extreme caution should be used when introducing a dog to a potential trigger. Even for dogs that are generally social once in close proximity, dogs should never be brought close to their triggers while displaying these behaviors as doing so could easily result in a fight or incident. For dogs that display reactivity towards other dogs, we recommend avoiding areas with many unknown dogs such as dog parks, daycares, or high traffic public spaces.

### **Working with Reactivity**

First you should determine what your dog's triggers are. Make a list of things that your dog reacts to so that you can start systematically working on increasing comfort and calmness when in the presence of each trigger. This list will help guide you as you build your management and training plan.

Our goal when working on reactivity is to change the underlying emotion that is fueling the behavior. To do this, we use positive reinforcement to address any fear, frustration or arousal that is causing reactivity to occur and either counter-condition them to reduce or eliminate the fear and/or teach the animal what we want them to do instead. For example, if your dog is reacting out of fear, we want to focus on counterconditioning to help them feel more comfortable when they are in the presence of a given trigger. If they are over aroused or frustrated, we want to focus on building calmness, increasing self-control, and/or teach a set of behaviors that are incompatible with those reactive behaviors. It's important to remember that these behaviors are symptoms of a bigger underlying emotion or issue. Punishment should never be used to modify reactivity as research consistently demonstrates that it further increases fear and anxiety, which tends to result in an increase in reactivity and aggression overall. Punishment includes things such as: shock or electronic collars; prong collars; choke chains; verbal or leash corrections; or any tool or stimuli that may cause a reduction in a behavior due to fear or avoidance.

## Managing Reactivity

The most important part in working with or treating reactivity is avoiding situations where your dog may react. Preventing this reactivity from happening in the first place is the key to increasing comfort, lowering arousal, and preventing the issue from getting worse. Especially while your dog is working through a counter conditioning or training plan, you should make every effort to manage the environment in a way that prevents the animal from feeling the need to practice these reactive behaviors. The key is if you see the behaviors, think about creative ways that you can prevent exposure to the thing they're reacting to. Some ideas are:

- Add a visual barrier, such as an opaque window film to windows and doors to prevent them from seeing or reacting to triggers outside.
- Install a privacy fence or fence screen to block the dog from seeing dogs or people walking past the house or yard.
- Take the dog out for potty breaks on leash so you can help move them away if a trigger does appear.
- Use sound machines or play classical music to reduce the intensity or presence of outside auditory stimuli.
- Choose locations that are free from their triggers to walk or exercise. Parks, trails or open fields are likely good places to start and may be less stressful for both you and your dog than walks around a busy neighborhood.
- Add a “do not knock, please call or text when you get here” sign to your door if your dog reacts to the doorbell.

## Recommended Tools

- A treat pouch is an invaluable tool when training. Treat pouches will keep your pockets clean and will allow you to quickly retrieve your treats, which will be a critical part of your training and management plan.
- A front clip harness that also has a back attachment is a great tool to use while training. The front attachment hooks to the front of the chest and helps turn the dogs towards you if they lunge or pull forward. This is a great way to increase safety and control if your dog does react when out on a walk. This should only be used on an emergency basis as the key is avoiding any situation where your dog may feel the need to lunge forward. A second point of contact hooked to the back of the harness is advised.
- A martingale collar is a no-slip collar that, when fit properly, will not slip over the head if the dog squirms or lunges forward. Martingale collars should only be used as a backup or second point of contact as it can be dangerous for your dog to have a large amount of sudden pressure on the neck area.
- A leash or vest that indicates to others around you that you might need more space is a great way to decrease the likelihood of people or dogs approaching. These are available in a variety of colors and styles with phrases ranging from “In Training” to “Please Give Me Space”.

- A muzzle that the dog has been properly counter conditioned to is a great tool for some dogs as it allows them to interact with the outside world in a way that keeps them and others safe. Remember that even if your dog is properly restrained, an off-leash dog is bound to approach suddenly. Having your dog properly trained to use a muzzle is a great way for some dogs to avoid any potential harm while out in the world.
- If your dog is reactive towards new people, add a lock to the insides of any gates outside with a “Beware of Dog” sign. This will help anyone approaching, such as a landscaper or city worker from entering your yard without you knowing.

### **Training**

- Prepare high value treats! Before you head out for any training walks or controlled exposures, prepare some yummy, high-value treats, such as small pieces of cut up hot dogs, boiled chicken or small pieces of cheese.
- Go for walks during the times when you’re less likely to encounter other dogs or people. This will help keep your dog feeling safe while also providing them with enriching outdoor experiences.
- Provide ample distance from any triggers. The more you can keep your dog under threshold, or at a distance where they are not showing signs of reactivity, the more effective your training will be. For some dogs this might mean crossing the street when a trigger approaches. For others, this might mean driving off-site to train in a park or open field.
- Begin to feed your dog the moment they see their trigger until the moment that the trigger has passed. Refrain from giving a command such as “sit”, as we want to connect the presence of the trigger with the reward as opposed to the behavior itself. The goal is to teach the animal that when the trigger is present, good things happen. This causes the dog to make the association between the thing they find to be scary or frustrating with good things happening.
- Move them away from triggers before they react! If your dog begins to react or shows signs that they are going to react, give the cue “Let’s Go!” and quickly move or run in the opposite direction. If you get stuck in a situation where you can’t move away, toss treats on the ground and say “Find it!” or otherwise distract your dog while the trigger passes.
- Reinforce your dog for any calm or relaxed behavior at any point. Encouraging any behaviors that help either self soothe or remain calm are great to reinforce.

### **Enrichment**

Provide regular enrichment! Giving your dog many ways to stay busy, solve problems, and use his/her brain is an excellent way to reduce the severity of reactivity and give dogs alternative, healthier behaviors to practice natural, healthy behaviors. Some options might be:

- Kong Wobbler
- Starmark Bob-a-lot
- Kong Gyro
- Original Kong: Fill with peanut butter, cream cheese or wet food and freeze for a longer-lasting, high-value treat

## Homemade enrichment items

- Drill holes in the side of a PVC pipe, fill with kibble, and put a cap on both ends. You can use this for mealtimes or a fun activity to do with treats.
- Make a foraging box by stuffing a cardboard box, paper towel or toilet paper roll with newspaper and treats hidden inside. Simply close the box or pinch the ends of the roll and allow your dog to dig, chew and toss them around to figure out how to get to the treats out.
- Fill a muffin tin with kibble. Put tennis balls to cover the food for added difficulty.

## Tips and Tricks

- Remember to always keep your dog on leash when in public as to avoid any potential incidents or accidents from occurring when potential triggers come into sight.
- A little bit of treat prep will save you loads of time. We recommend cooking a good stack of chicken or hot dogs at one time, chopping them up into small pieces, dividing them into ziplock bags, and tossing them into the freezer. This allows you to be able to move them to the fridge when you're ready to use them and prevents you from having to prepare each time you want to train.
- High levels of stress can cause disruption in the GI tract. If a dog cannot take a food that they would take outside of that environment, they are likely too aroused or stressed. If your dog is unable to take food or is having a hard time remaining calm, you'll want to get more distance and try again when they are under lower levels of stress.
- Remember that reactivity is caused by an underlying emotion and is not an attempt to establish dominance or control. Punishment should never be used to modify reactivity as it further increases any stress, fear, anxiety, or frustration, which has been shown to increase reactivity and aggression overall.

## When to Seek Additional Help

When searching for trainers, it is critical that you find a trainer who is certified through a third-party organization that requires: trainers prove they have a certain level of knowledge about things like body language, behavior, learning theory, and training; are held to a certain code of ethics; and are required to receive ongoing continuing education. The two main organizations where you can search a database to find certified trainers near you is the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers or the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants.

Additionally, it is never a bad idea to consult with a Board-Certified Veterinary Behaviorist to help you diagnose, manage, and create a treatment plan for your dog's reactivity. To find a Behaviorist, see the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists website to search for the closest behaviorist near you. If you aren't sure if this is an appropriate measure for you, the following are signs that you should consult with a Board-Certified Veterinary Behaviorist who can help you further evaluate your situation:

- Constant or severe signs of stress, fear, anxiety or reactivity
- An increase in severity or plateau in training
- Unable or difficult time recovering after being startled or exposed to a trigger
- Inability to find a distance where your dog can be successful or does not react
- You believe your dog is a bite risk to you, your other pets, or people in the environment
- The behavior is interfering with your or your pet's quality of life
- You would like additional support or help learning to train and manage your dog's reactivity