

Dog Reactivity on Walks

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Dog reactivity on walks is a very common issue. Reactivity is USUALLY fear based, though excitement based is also fairly common. There are a lot of things that play a role in a dog developing reactivity and why it may occur only on walks rather than during other times. First we'll look at some basics, then we'll go over my preferred method of rehabilitating the issue. www.careforreactivedogs.com is also a great resource!

What is Reactivity?

As said above, reactivity is usually a response to a trigger that is based in fear or excitement. Triggers can be people, other dogs, etc and the response usually includes barking, lunging, growling, and hackles (neck fur) being raised. Different dogs have different triggers. The goal of the reactive dog is to make the scary thing go away so that they can have a more comfortable distance. The distance needed is very individual to the dog. Some may be fine if the trigger is across the street, some may need 100 yards or more to feel comfortable. Reactivity IS rarely caused by true aggression where the dog is not fearful, but is ready to fight/kill the trigger. **Note:** car chasing and small animal chasing is usually not reactivity, but rather prey drive or herding drive. You can use the same training methods to help solve those issues as well though!

How does Reactivity develop?

Because reactivity is a fear response, it can develop in different ways:

- **It can occur gradually as the fear of the triggers increases.** Sometimes this is confusing for people because they didn't notice or understand their dog's subtler signs of fear and so kept putting them in those fearful situations without realizing it was escalating the dog's fear. It can develop due to lack of socialization. It can happen suddenly as a response to a traumatic incident. How the reactivity develops really doesn't impact the training to solve it, though it is always a good idea to understand where your dog is coming from.
- **Reactivity can also be directly, though unintentionally, created by humans.** This happens when a human uses a punishment or aversive based training method or tool (such as prong or electronic collars) to manage the dog while on a walk. The dog sees a person or other dog, wants to go meet them and so pulls towards them, the dog gets a painful correction with the shock or prong collar or leash pop. The dog then associates unfamiliar dogs and people on walks as things that cause pain. This makes the dog fearful of them and so the dog barks/lunges to keep the people away to avoid the pain. Often this is a vicious circle because the dog is then corrected for their reactivity, leading to more and more negative feelings of those triggers.
- **Lastly, walks are often the only exercise and enrichment many dogs get on a daily basis.** This leads to dogs that are overexcited and over energetic during their walk. This creates a poor state of mind for meeting other dogs and people. All that excess excitement can create stress which the dog can gradually associate as a bad thing with people and other dogs.

Leashes and Reactivity

Often I hear people say that their dog is fine with other dogs and people when offleash and it's only when they are ON a leash that they become reactive. This can be for a number of reasons:

1. **Leashes make the dog feel trapped.** They know they cannot get away from the trigger if they wanted to. This makes them more fearful and more likely to react to defend their space.
2. **Leashes cause painful corrections.** When the owner/handler is using a prong collar or leash pops to correct the dog, the dog may realize that the pain (reason for the fear) only occurs when the dog is on leash.
3. **Leash tension can also create issues.** As the dog is pulled (or pulls) they can feel that tension and stress and that can cause them to be more fearful.

How to Solve Reactivity

- **Understanding that Reactivity is FEAR based is the first step to solving it.** Fear takes TIME and DEDICATION to rehabilitate. Once owners realize that their dog isn't trying to be aggressive and is just afraid, often they have more patience to work through that fear!
- **First of all, make sure your dog has a fulfilling and enriched lifestyle.** This will help reduce the excess excitement and energy your dog will have on a walk. Do a robust and energetic play session and then a short rest (so that mental excitement calms down) before you walk your dog.
- **Next, you need to teach the dog to walk politely on leash and ENJOY being on leash with you through positive training methods.** This will reduce the leash effects of the reactivity and the chances that you will unintentionally create reactivity through painful corrections or pulling on the leash. It will also create a more relaxed walking structure. Encourage

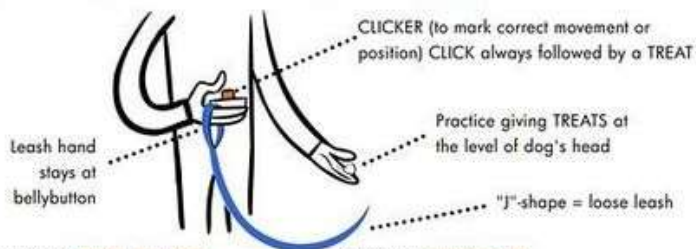
sniffing rather than looking for things to react to. Sniffing is very stress relieving for dogs and can help them deal with the anxiety of seeing other dogs or people on walks. The below graphics will share with you how to do this. In the second graphic, I tend to use method 2. Stick with it. Once I didn't leave my driveway for 2 weeks with a foster dog!

TEACHING YOUR DOG TO WALK POLITELY ON LEASH

PART ONE: Start in a small, boring space. Go at your dog's pace.

The most important step in teaching your dog to walk politely on leash is showing your dog where you want him to be while he is on leash.

To make things easier for your dog, start practicing in a small, boring space. This improves the odds that your dog will stay close to you.



PRACTICE WITH NO DOG

Practice clicking and feeding a treat at your pant seam, at the level of your dog's head.

PRACTICE WITH DOG

Practice holding the leash at your bellybutton as you click and feed.



Click and treat rapidly a few times in the correct position.



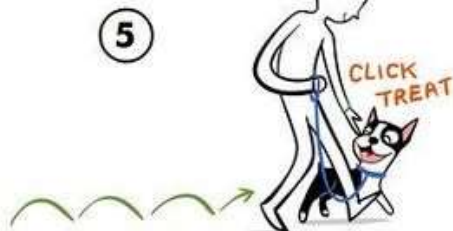
Move slightly out of heel position and wait for your dog to move closer to you.



As soon as your dog moves even the tiniest step closer to you, click and feed at the "ideal" head position.



Repeat until your dog moves into heel position every time you move out of it.



Gradually take more and more steps between clicks and treats. If your dog gets confused, go back to just one step and then increase the number of steps more slowly to help him understand.



Then start changing direction and speed.



Next, move to a larger or more interesting space, and start over from **STEP 1**. When your dog can handle **STEP 6** in the new space, move to another new space, starting over from **STEP 1** again.

TEACHING YOUR DOG TO WALK POLITELY ON LEASH

PART TWO: Help! My Dog Is Pulling!



If pulling on the leash gets your dog where he wants to go, he'll keep pulling. To avoid teaching your dog that pulling is a good strategy, use one of the techniques described below.

TECHNIQUE 1: "I AM A ROCK"

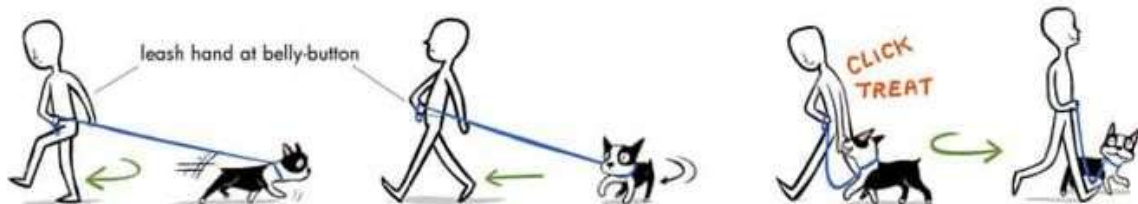


When your dog pulls, stop in your tracks. Wait. As you wait, pretend you have no dog.

When your dog backs up or turns to you, click and feed a treat at your pant seam.

Then move forward again.

TECHNIQUE 2: "BACK & FORTH"



When your dog pulls, turn around and walk purposefully in the opposite direction. When your dog catches up to heel position...

Click and treat. Then turn around and continue in your original direction.

TECHNIQUE 3: "OFF AT AN ANGLE"



This is a great technique for dogs who are very strong. When your dog pulls, simply move away at a random angle that isn't 180 degrees.

Wait for your dog to catch up to heel position.

Click and treat. Then turn around and continue in your original direction again.

If your dog keeps pulling, the environment is probably too exciting. Go back to teaching your dog polite leash walking in a less exciting place. Then build up gradually to walking on leash in the exciting environment again.

Remember to go back to PART ONE every time you practice in a new place.

- **Next, it's important that you advocate for your dog.** If your dog is reactive to strange people or dogs, then it is your responsibility to make sure they aren't put into a situation where they feel they need to defend their space. Dogs react because they are fearful and feel the need to defend themselves. Moving them out of those situations and preventing them in the first place is key to reducing that fear. On top of that, your dog will start to trust that YOU will protect them from being too close to the scary things, therefore they don't have to! This will make them overall more comfortable during the walk. The less stress and general fear and dread they feel, the less likely they will be reactive!
- **Do not punish, correct, or scold the behavior!** The behavior is a symptom of the underlying negativity the dog is feeling at the time, just like a fever is a symptom of an underlying disease. Adding more negativity to a dog that is fearful in that situation will not solve the underlying problem; in all likelihood, it will make it worse! It's like if you were afraid of spiders and every time a spider got near you you flinched and screamed. Now imagine I yanked on your clothes or shocked you every time you flinched and screamed, would you feel less fearful of spiders, or more fearful of spiders? You may not scream out loud, but you certainly wouldn't start enjoying having spiders around. You may even eventually have a complete panic breakdown worried about both the spiders and the corrections. Reactive dogs are much the same!
- **Personally, I find the "Engage and Disengage Game" the best way to solve all reactivity issues.** In this game, getting the proper distance is the key. You need to be at the distance where the dog can see the trigger, but not react to it. If the dog is reacting, you're TOO CLOSE! Then, you reward the dog with a really high value treat (like hot dog or squeeze cheese or chicken breast or even steak) for looking at the trigger and not reacting. Not only does this encourage a non-reactive behavior, but it associates seeing the scary thing with good things happening: "Hey, when I see scary

people, I get STEAK! Maybe scary people aren't so scary if they make steak happen...". Additionally, this game teaches the dog to voluntarily disengage with the trigger and focus on you so that if you get into a situation where the dog is afraid, he will look to you to guide him out of that situation rather than feeling the need to take the situation into his own paws.

THE ENGAGE-DISENGAGE GAME

A training game for dogs who are FEARFUL, ANXIOUS, or FRUSTRATED around a specific trigger such as another dog, person, or sound. The goal is to first decrease the dog's fear/anxiety/frustration and then to teach the dog a new safe and appropriate behavior to do instead.

- PREP:**
- High value treats
 - Clicker (or verbal marker)
 - Humane harness or collar
 - Practice fast u-turns by luring your dog with a treat on his nose, or tossing "find-it" treats on the ground as you both walk away quickly in the opposite direction.

- Take a break if you see subtle stress signals (displacement behaviors) such as excessive lip licking, yawning, or scratching.



PLAY FOR 1-5 MINUTES. TAKE A BREAK. REPEAT.

LEVEL 1: ENGAGE

- 1  Start at a safe distance away from the trigger, where your dog is not reacting. Be quiet and still so your dog notices the trigger on his own.
- 2  **CLICK!**
At the precise moment your dog ENGAGES by looking at the trigger, CLICK!
- 3  When your dog turns his head towards you after the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 1 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row at the same distance before moving on to LEVEL 2. A successful repetition is when your dog immediately turns back to you after the click.

If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, keep playing LEVEL 1 until your dog has calmly looked at (or engaged with) the trigger from every direction. Then move on to LEVEL 2.

LEVEL 2: DISENGAGE

- 1  Let your dog notice the trigger again, but now wait 1-5 seconds to see if he will offer to LOOK AWAY from the trigger on his own.
If your dog is fixating on the trigger for longer than 5 seconds, GO BACK to LEVEL 1.
- 2  **CLICK!**
At the precise moment your dog DISENGAGES by looking away from the trigger, CLICK!
- 3  After the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 2 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row before moving 1-5 steps closer to the trigger. A successful repetition is when your dog comfortably disengages with the trigger on his own.

As you move closer, keep playing LEVEL 2 if the trigger is not moving or changing in intensity. If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, go back to LEVEL 1 at the new distance.