

REACTIVITY IN DOGS

WHAT IS IT?

Reactivity is a common behavior in dogs and means that a dog reacts to other dogs, people or objects (his “triggers”) with unwanted behaviors such as barking, pulling, lunging, or growling. Other dogs are a very common trigger, as well as unfamiliar people or objects and things that move, such as bicycles. A dog is most likely reactive if you cannot distract him with his favorite treats when a trigger is present.

A dog who displays reactivity while on leash is commonly referred to as “leash reactive.” And when a dog excessively barks, lunges or growls behind a barrier, he is often said to have “barrier frustration” or to be engaged in “fence fighting.”

CAUSES

Some dogs simply do not do well behind a fence or while on leash. Reactivity is caused by a number of factors, which include too little socialization as a puppy and the individual dog’s brain chemistry, among others.

Most reactive dogs are afraid of their triggers. For example, for those who are leash reactive, they know that the leash prevents them from running away from something that scares them, so, they try to act scary themselves by barking, lunging or growling in order to intimidate the trigger. This behavior works. A perceptive dog or person will not approach a reactive dog, and bicycles naturally keep moving. Consequently, the dog perceives the reactive behavior to be working because it results in the scary object moving away. Reactivity is highly reinforced, and the behavior tends to worsen without intervention.

Other causes of reactivity include:

- Excitement/arousal: the dog becomes extremely worked up in the presence of a trigger
- Frustration: the dog is only reactive when he or she cannot greet or interact with a person, pet or object with which he wishes to interact
- Predation: some dogs are genetically inclined to behave aggressively toward smaller animals; however, not all predatory dogs are reactive
- Dog Aggression: a small percentage of dogs has a genetic inclination to behave aggressively toward any dog to whom they are not bonded; while uncommon, dog aggression requires significant management for the safety of other pets; not all dogs who are dog aggressive are also reactive
- Sudden environmental change: the dog reacts to any sudden change in his environment and has no specific trigger (for example, someone the dog knows rushes through the door)

Dog behavior has many layers. As an example, excitement can lead to frustration which can then lead to reactivity.

Many dogs do not display reactive behaviors in a shelter environment. If they are stressed, overwhelmed or shut down in a shelter environment, they are not likely to demonstrate reactive behavior. So, it is possible that a dog may show reactive behaviors once comfortable and living in his new home. That said, reactivity in shelter dogs is no more common than it is in dogs acquired elsewhere.

WHAT TO DO AND WHAT NOT TO DO

Reactivity is relatively common, and there are lots of resources to help you effectively manage this behavior in your dog. We recommend you consider enrolling in our Managing a Reactive Dog class or schedule a free behavior consultation through our Behavior Helpline. Many reactive dogs also get help through veterinary intervention, such as prescribed anti-anxiety medications. And some dogs who are suffering from medical conditions can become reactive, so a thorough veterinary examination if new reactive behavior develops is recommended.

If your dog is not spayed or neutered, speak with your veterinarian about having this done. It is not an immediate fix for behavior issues; however, it can aid in behavior modification. Spaying and neutering can reduce hormonal factors influencing unwanted behavior.

While waiting for a class or consult, the short book *Feisty Fido* by Patricia McConnell is excellent at helping everyday dog owners start addressing their dogs' reactivity. Treats will only be effective before your dog becomes reactive, but any reward-based (i.e. positive reinforcement) training, such as manners and tricks, can help dogs learn to focus their attention on you.

Keep distance between your dog and his triggers, and when this is not possible, try to put an object between your dog and his triggers, such as a car or tree. Walk in the quietest environment possible and during the calmest time of day. It is important to keep your dog as calm as possible while following a behavior modification plan.

Understand that while most reactive dogs are not truly aggressive, they may get into a fight or bite to protect themselves when their warnings are not respected. Do not try to "socialize" adult dogs who are reactive without consulting a professional trainer. Simply interacting or being near other dogs will not solve reactivity and could make the issue worse.

Do not use punishment techniques for training reactive dogs. Reactivity is ultimately caused by the dog's emotions. The emotions are the cause of the unwanted behavior, and the barking and lunging is the symptom. If you suppress the dog's warnings, you may cause the dog to be more likely to bite since you have not dealt with the actual source of the problem. When it appears to work, punishment is only suppressing the behavior, not dealing with the actual cause of the behavior. When the dog's emotions have been addressed, then there will be a natural decrease in the reactive behavior.

RESOURCES

Feisty Fido by Patricia McConnell

Control Unleashed - Reactive to Relaxed by Leslie McDevitt

Pattern Games by Leslie McDevitt

Click to Calm by Emma Parsons

Managing a Reactive Dog class: www.richmondspca.org/training

<https://www.ddfl.org/resource/understanding-reactivity-in-dogs>

<https://m.iaabc.org/consultant>

<https://www.petprofessionalguild.com/Zip-Code-Search>

<https://apps.apdt.com/eweb/DynamicPage.aspx?webcode=TrainerSearch>

<https://www.ccpdt.org/dog-owners/certified-dog-trainer-directory>