

Helping a Dog with On-Leash Reactivity

The most common reason a dog may react aggressively towards other dogs, people or fast-moving bikes and cars is fear. The dog's aggressive response works to keep the scary dog, person or vehicle away or at a distance. Lack of socialization, frustration or a previous bad experience are usually the root cause of this fear and helping the dog with specific strategies that will build confidence and improve the dog's emotional response is the goal.

Management

If it is a new dog or training plan, it is helpful to identify the distance away from the trigger where the dog will begin to react. Try to keep the dog under the reaction threshold by avoiding the trigger (other dogs, people or object) until the dog has mastered the obedience cues below. The goal is to get the dog to stop practicing the reactive behavior by creating distance; crossing the street, changing direction or hiding behind a parked car are possible strategies. Walking on quiet streets during low traffic times makes this easier to achieve.



When it is impossible to avoid close encounters, it is advisable to keep the dog in the back yard at first.

Equipment

Always fill pockets or treat bags with small, high value treats before every walk for luring the dog's attention away from the trigger. Remember, if the dog is allowed to practice the reactive behavior, reactivity will become more frequent and intense. The strategy is to keep the dog under threshold, so it has no reason to feel unsafe.

The right equipment is very important for safety and success. Make sure the leash is in good condition and is no longer than 5-6 feet. Front clip harnesses can work well for some dogs such as the Easy Walk Harness or the Freedom Harness (both can be found online and in pet supply stores. Head halters such as the Opti Head Halter or the Gentle Leader are also appropriate as they give good control in a non-punitive manner. ***See handout for Training with a Head Halter** When in doubt about the best choice of equipment for the dog, consult a dog trainer.

Obedience

Start by teaching the dog some basic obedience cues that will be the foundation tools providing the dog with clear directions. If a private trainer is necessary to assist with the training, consult one who uses positive reinforcement and avoids the use of punishment. The following protocols are also recommended: **Clicker Training, Relaxation Protocol, Managing your Dog's Behavior, Dog Walking 101, Leave it and Drop it**. Important skills the dog need to master before starting out are: Sit, Watch, Let's go, and Leave it.

Counter Conditioning and Desensitization

If we remember that the dog's reactivity is rooted in fear, we can work to change the dog's emotional response to the scary dog, person, or thing. One way to do this is to condition the dog that good things happen in the presence of what the dog considers to be scary.

Step 1

Determine what treats the dog really likes and keep them in a bait bag or pocket for easy access. Don't hold back; these treats should be something it gets in no other circumstance. You can even use people food like roast chicken, steak or cheese. Whatever sends the dog over the moon!

Step 2

Stand at a distance where the dog can see the trigger without reacting. Remember the goal of keeping the dog under threshold.

Step 3

When the trigger appears, wait a split second for the dog to see it and then start to give the dog the treats and continue to deliver the treats until the trigger is out of sight. Our goal is to change the dog's association with the scary thing from "stay away" to "that scary thing makes good things happen."

Step 4

Once the dog is having success from this distance, you can start to move a little closer. This could mean only 3-5 feet closer. Go slow; be patient. Remember when you allow the dog to go over threshold, thinking stops and the dog starts rehearsing the unwanted behavior.

Response Substitution

Another method of training that can help a reactive dog is the use of response substitution. This method works by replacing the unwanted behavior with an alternate, more appropriate one. For example, a dog cannot lunge aggressively at the end of a leash if it is focusing on the handler or responding to obedience cues. Once the dog can respond reliably to the cues suggested above without distraction, begin to use response substitution on walks. The goal is to keep the dog's attention by giving cues that are generously rewarded rather than giving the dog the opportunity to react to the trigger. rehearsing the unwanted behavior.

Step 1

Start by training at a time when there is a low amount of traffic and it is possible to have a distance between the dog and the trigger. It is generally best to start with the trigger on the other side of the street. Have the dog's favorite treats easily available in a pocket or bait bag.

Step 2

As soon as the trigger is in sight and before the dog starts to react, immediately start some fast-paced obedience with the dog until the trigger is out of sight. The cues need to be very familiar to the dog and there needs to be a high level of reinforcement with the treats. Easy cues to start with are: "Let's go" walking forward or backing up and then adding some quick sits, "Watch" rewarding the dog for checking in, and "Leave it" followed by fast movement while changing direction.

Step 3

With time it should be possible to move progressively closer to the trigger. Remember to move slowly and be patient, always keeping the dog under threshold by using high value treats, fast movements and an appropriate distance from the trigger. Keep sessions short and try to end with success. Keeping training notes can be helpful for planning the next session.