



On-Leash “Reactivity” to Dogs

On-leash reactivity to other dogs is not an uncommon problem. The dog’s behavior can be embarrassing and causes anxiety for people and dogs alike. The subtle signs typically starts off with stiffening, whining or walking high on the dog’s toes when he sees another dog. The subtle signs can eventually turn into a problematic behavior consisting of lunging, barking or growling and the dog’s comfort zone increases over time.

Barking and lunging at other dogs when on lead are not necessarily “aggressive” behaviors. These behaviors can be signs of excitement, fear and/or frustration. The dog’s frustration can increase over time when he cannot say hello to dogs or when he has an inability to flee from dogs that frighten him. Overtime, the dog responds inappropriately at the sight of the dog in an exaggerated, offensive or overly “aroused” manner.

If the dog is permitted to continue to rehearse these undesirable behaviors on leash, the frustration will continue to grow and the intensity and frequency of the unwanted behaviors may increase.

Managing and Modifying Your Dog’s Behavior

There are techniques and pieces of equipment that you can utilize to help with the rehabilitation process of your “reactive” dog.

1. **Equipment.** There are 2 pieces of equipment that work best for dogs that are difficult to control on leash. A front-clip harness (www.freedomenopullharness.com) or a head halter (Snoot Loop is the preferred - www.dogswithissues.com) Dogs typically acclimate to front clip harnesses quicker than a head halter but you will have better control with your dog’s lunging and/or barking if you use a halter.
2. **Controlling Your Dog’s Reactivity.** Proximity to other dogs is an important variable when attempting to work with your dog. In other words, what distance can your dog see another dog and still be comfortable before becoming overly aroused or aggressive on leash? Further, some dogs can remain calm around a small dog, a quiet dog or one that ignores him but may become more “reactive’ when the dog picks up speed or gets too close.

What you should be looking for are subtle changes in your dog’s body language that switches him from calm to tense. Things to look for:

- **Facial expressions** - open to closed mouth, hard, direct stares with or without dilated pupils, muscle tension, panting either stops or starts
- **Vocalization** - whining, growling or barking
- **Changes in posture** - relaxed walk to high on the dog's toes or low and crouched as if stalking, ears relaxed to alert and forward or pinned back, tail relaxed and wagging to high, stiff and alert, sometimes curled over the back
- **Communicative changes** - sniffing the ground, looking away, lying down, appearing to look smaller instead of bigger, raised hackles (fur on back) either between shoulder blades or from the neck to the tip of the tail
- **Stress signals for you** - panting to holding his breath, lip licking, yawning

The methods listed below should be worked on when your dog appears to be able to respond to you, easily take treats and is calm enough to function without seeing the changes listed above.

Changing Your Dog's Emotion Response

Your goal should be to first change your dog's emotional response when he sees another dog from negative to positive. While we really don't know much about a dog's emotional response without using a heart monitor, we can make educated guesses by observing and reading the dog's body language. When changing your dog's emotional response, you first need to take a few factors into account:

- In what context can your dog be comfortable or neutral when he sees a dog (i.e., distance from the neutral dog, type of dog, behavior of the other dog, size of the dog, specific breed or type of dog)?
- Why is your dog reacting in a negative way when he sees another dog (i.e., fearful, excitement, threatening)?
- Does your dog do fine off leash but not on leash?

Once your dog's comfort level has been established, you will give your dog something wonderful each and every time your dog looks at another dog. This can be delicious treats, a favorite tug toy, Frisbee or ball. The dog need not do anything to earn the treat. You are simply making a positive association at the sight of the neutral dog. Good things happen for your dog when he sees another dog. This can take a lot of time, patience, preparation and repeated trials. You've done your job when your dog looks at a neutral dog and looks to you for the treat or toy.

Teaching an Incompatible Behavior

Once you have changed your dog's emotional response to the sight of a dog, you will work on rewarding an incompatible behavior to barking and lunging. Choose a reinforcer (also known as a reward) that your dog seems to love and never gets at other times.

You will now teach your dog an incompatible behavior to barking or lunging. Teach your dog to look into your eyes when you say his name. Start by reinforcing each and every time your dog looks into your eyes. Say, "yes" and follow it with a treat. Once he is giving you lots of eye contact, say his name just prior to him looking at you. The more you reinforce this behavior, the better. Your dog should begin to look at you when he sees a dog in hopes of getting a treat for looking to you for guidance. Once you have the dog's focus and attention, you should be able to ask him to sit, down or come.

Visit our website for additional help. www.ashevill humane.org

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