



Reactivity in Dogs

Reactivity is a common concern among dog owners and covers a wide range of behaviors. Dogs who are over-excitabile, fearful, prey driven, medically compromised, protective, and aggressive often have some form of reactivity. Reactivity is a natural dog behavior and should be given patience as you work through it with them.

EXCITABLE REACTIVITY

The dog is showing reactive behaviors due to excess energy and/or frustration as they are prevented from socializing with other people and animals.

Common signs of over-excitabile reactivity: pulling towards other people and/or animals, high pitched barks, play growling, jumping, high wagging tails, loose body language, spinning, biting their leash, biting their handler, and more.

How to support an over-excited dog:

- Socialize without barriers often. Allow for safe socials with people and other dogs without leashes and fences interfering.
- Your leash is a training tool. If you plan to socialize with your dog while they are on a leash, do so when they are calm and stay consistent.
- Strangers and other animals often reinforce poor behaviors by petting and talking to your dog after barking or jumping. Advocate for your dog's training needs.
- Try adding training, mental games, or playing prior to your walks. This gains focus, tires them out a little, leading to better behavior overall.

FEAR-BASED REACTIVITY

The dog tends to be fearful of new environments, other people, other animals, or something else leading to unwanted reactive behaviors.

Common signs of fear-based reactivity: silent stressing, whining, tail tucked, whale eye, ears pegged back, barking, and attempting to bite.

How to support a fearful dog:

- Trust them when they are uncomfortable. Pushing a fearful dog too far can become dangerous and they may try to bite.
- Start exposing them slowly to new things. New noises, sights, textures, people, animals, and places are important parts of socialization.
- A fearful dog can benefit greatly from a group training class, even if they just observe what is happening without much participation.
- Give newly adopted dogs time to adapt. If you just adopted a dog, they require decompression time in their new environment prior to
- Advocate for your dog's space. Don't allow a stranger to pet your fearful dog without careful consideration of your dog's mental state.

AGGRESSION REACTIVITY

Aggression is often a result of a very traumatic experience. A dog who is truly aggressive will intentionally try to hurt something. Many “reactive” dogs do not fall into the category of aggressiveness, though it may seem that way.

Common signs of aggression: baring teeth, deep and consistent barking, excessive drool, growling, lowering their head, lunging or charging, and attempting to bite.

How to support an aggressive dog:

- Muzzle if necessary. Muzzling an aggressive dog can ensure the safety of others while providing more freedom to work with them on the reactivity in public.
- Get space. Walk early in the morning or later in the evening to avoid triggers.
- It is ok to run away! If you get into a situation where your dog is way too reactive, act excited and jog in the opposite direction. Fully remove them from the situation.

EXTRA TIPS FOR WORKING ON ANY TYPE OF REACTIVITY:

- **Reward the behaviors you do like!** If your dog sits and observes, looks at you for guidance, walks past a typical trigger with little or no reaction, reward them.
- **Stay calm and confident.** Your dog is looking for guidance. Keep your arms relaxed, talk to them in a calm voice, and take a deep breath if you start to feel tension in yourself.
- **Avoid tightening the leash.** Your tension and leash tension is perceived as correction. If you start tightening before a reaction, you are already making your dog more tense prior to any reaction occurring.
- **Set yourself up for success.** Nervous or scared? That’s ok! Look up dog puzzles, enrichment games, and other ideas online for stimulating a reactive dog at home
- **Play “find-it”.** Get smelly treats and go to a busier place, throw those treats on the ground and allow your dog to find them around distractions. This creates a positive association to calmer behavior.
- **Avoid over-corrective tools like choke chains, prong or pinch collars, and e-collars as well as yelling or physically punishing your dog.** These methods often make reactivity worse by associating the things they react to with pain, fear, and punishment.

Painful or medically unstable dogs can become reactive.

- If your dog is reactive or aggressive seemingly out of nowhere, it is always recommended to rule out any medical concerns with your vet that could be causing reactivity.
- The age of the dog can be a major factor. Older dogs who can’t hear or see well tend to show increased reactive behaviors as they age.
- Follow guidance from your vet for best success in managing behaviors due to medical causes.
- Always seek out professional guidance from a trainer and/or Veterinarian if you are struggling to manage your react dog. This is just basic information to get you started. Every dog is different and may require specialized pathways to reach your goals with them.

QUESTIONS?

Contact the HSSW Dog Training Team at dogtraining@southwesthumane.org or visit hssw.org/training.