



Leash Reactivity

If your dog lunges, growls, and acts aggressively toward other dogs, people, or fast-moving objects like cars, bicycles, or motorcycles, they are probably leash reactive. It's not uncommon for dogs to get worked up when they see other dogs at a distance or a fast-moving object and can't get to them due to being physically restrained on a leash. Below is some information so that you can learn more about leash reactivity and how to work on the problem.

- The reason your dog is having this full-blown fit varies based on many factors. Many dogs love to chase animals and objects that move by them fast because it triggers their instinctual behavior that they can have to run things down and hunt. Chase is a fun game to play with your dog in the backyard, but it has a time and a place and has to be controlled. Puppies that have been properly socialized and gradually exposed to public walking trails and parks are going to be less likely to become leash reactive. Herding breeds, such as border collies, Australian shepherds, and heelers, are more prone to chase and nip at things and animals because that's what they were bred to do. The most common reasons dogs become leash reactive toward people and dogs are due to: fear of strangers, being territorial/protective of their home/neighborhood or the person walking them, or poor social skills. By being on leash, your dog may feel trapped and threatened, so they resort to offensive tactics in order to defend themselves. The pressure of the collar around their neck as they pull can also add to a dog's arousal level and put them on guard because, when dogs get into fights, they often go for each other's necks. Lastly, since dogs communicate more with body language than verbal language, being on leash can also make a dog feel like their ability to properly communicate is inhibited.
- You never want to allow a dog to meet another dog if either one is backing away, lunging, and/or barking aggressively. If you allow your dog to meet another dog or person while it is lunging and barking, then 1. you will be teaching your dog that it is okay to behave this way when greeting new dogs or people, and 2. it could result in a dog fight or a person being bit. The same goes for dogs reacting to fast-moving objects. If you allow a dog to chase a fast-moving object, it could result in your dog biting a bicyclist/runner/skateboarder or being hit by a car.
- Before working with your dog, it's important to understand the concept of being over threshold. The threshold is the point at which your dog is just about to go into its full-blown lunging, barking, spinning, leash biting, etc., but hasn't quite gone over the edge yet. Most dog owners learn pretty quickly that once your dog is over threshold and leash reactivity begins, there is little you can do or say to refocus your dog and get them to listen to you. It's very important that you learn your dog's precursor behaviors, which tell you your dog is close to going over threshold. Precursor behaviors to leash reactivity can include: growling; whining; fixed stare; tense body; slowing or stopping walking; high, tense, fast tail wag; low, slow tail wag; or crouching lower to the ground. Never verbally reprimand or punish your dog for growling or showing any other precursor behavior because it's very important that you listen to these subtle signs so you can better work with your dog while they are under threshold; listen to your dog so you can get him out of the situation that is making him feel uncomfortable. If you punish these precursor behaviors and make them go away, you will have an animal that becomes more unpredictable and could be mistakenly mislabeled as

having flash aggression, which could result in euthanasia. Always try to work with your dog's leash reactivity while your dog is under threshold and you have plenty of space to move around in.

- In order to work on leash reactivity, you must be able to get eye contact from your dog and be able to maintain eye contact for 2-5 seconds on command and in your home before trying to work on any leash reactivity exercise. You can teach her "look" by placing a treat at her nose and then raising it up to your eyes and then rewarding her with the treat when she makes eye contact (see exercise below).
1. Head halters are a wonderful training tool that allow you to have better control over your dog should they go over threshold. The two main brands are the Gentle Leader and the Halti, and both are sold in most pet stores. They are the same concept as a head halter used for a horse: If you have control over the head, you tend to have more control of the whole body. They are not muzzles and do not cause physical pain. Your dog can still bite, bark, take treats, and drink with it on. They just have a much harder time lunging and pulling, and it allows you to gently refocus their attention back on to you if you're having trouble. You want to make sure you take the time to gradually introduce the head halter to your dog with treats; most dogs don't like wearing them at first because they don't like things on their face. You should make every attempt to keep the leash loose while on your walks and not jerk on her head while she is wearing her head halter.
- While you are walking your dog on a leash in your neighborhood, periodically reward her with a high-value training treat (such as cut-up pieces of hot dog) for focusing her attention and eye contact on you. When you encounter another dog off in the distance, ask her to look at you by saying her name or "look," and then give her a treat. Then, as you walk by the other dog on the other side of the street, reward her for sitting and for looking at you. It's okay for your dog to look at the distraction and then look back at you. You want to teach your dog that they should be aware and comfortable with everything in the surrounding environment but that they should look to you for instruction and not take it upon themselves to take control of the situation. If you start to recognize some of her precursor behaviors, get more distance between you and the distraction. If she starts to lunge or bark at the other dog and you can't get her attention, do a u-turn and walk away from the dog by saying "let's go," and then reward her when she eventually refocuses her attention back on to you. Once you figure out the distance that she starts to reactively bark at other dogs, you can slowly try to get closer with positive reinforcement training. If you give her treats for being calm in the presence of other dogs, she will learn that other dogs are actually a good thing and that she needs to be calm around them.
 - You may want to enlist friends or family members with bikes or skateboards and other quiet, friendly dogs to help you during your training sessions so you can systematically work at preset distances. Never walk your dog during busy times during the day when you have little control over the other people who are out and about and their proximity to you and your dog.

The "Look" Exercise:

Eye contact is an integral part of being able to have control over a dog that is leash reactive and aggressive toward other dogs. She has to learn to look to you for direction and not take the initiative on her own to control things or try to go after other animals.

Practice the name game or the "look" game:

1. Start by practicing this game indoors with a small, high-value training treat
2. Say your dog's name or say "look"
3. The second that she makes eye contact with you, click your clicker**
4. Then give her a treat

5. It's imperative that every time she hears the click, she receives a treat.
6. Always practice this while she has her head halter and leash on, if you choose to use a head halter
7. First practice this exercise indoors, then in the backyard, and then in the front yard
8. She is not allowed to go on walks in the neighborhood until she has completely mastered this exercise in all three environments. Complete mastery means she will do this exercise well with all members of the household and with the distractions of other noises like hearing a squeaky toy in the background, hearing a tennis ball bounce, hearing a dog bark in the background, or hearing a treat bag crinkle.

**This exercise can be practiced with or without a clicker or training whistle; the click noise simply marks the exact moment in time when your dog did the correct behavior, and it tells your dog "good job, a treat is coming!" Clicker training is a faster, more precise way to train dogs.

Here are two great instructional videos on how to approach leash reactivity:

http://drsophiayin.com/videos/entry/podees_aggressive_to_other_dogs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPK7SML15YI>

- Some dogs do better when being introduced off leash in a big, open area that is neutral ground for them, meaning neither your yard/home or the other dog's yard/home. If you are introducing two dogs together for the first time in a fenced-in yard or room, make sure there are no food or toys present for them to fight over, and let them drag their leashes so there is no tension around their necks when they greet and so you can pull them apart easily if they get into a fight. You also want to make sure the room or yard is open enough so that neither dog will get cornered easily.
- If you have a dog that is territorial in your neighborhood but otherwise behaves better in more neutral areas, or if you have a dog that seems really excited and just wants to play with other dogs it sees but only knows how to solicit play by excitedly barking, both dogs may benefit from attending a reputable doggie daycare that behaviorally assesses their dogs beforehand. Playing off leash with other friendly dogs for a few hours per day will help with their social skills. Dogs that are fearful or aggressive toward other dogs should work with a behaviorist or certified positive reinforcement dog trainer.

If, after trying these suggestions, you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your dog, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.

Written by the Wayside Waifs Animal Behavior Team

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Below are some links with important information about how to work with a leash-reactive dog and how to do dog-to-dog introductions:

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/dogs-who-are-reactive-leash>

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/introducing-your-dog-head-halter>

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-do-u-turn>

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/desensitization-and-counterconditioning>

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/choosing-playmates-your-dog>

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/aggression-dogs>

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/canine-body-language>

<http://www.clickertraining.com/>

<http://www.clickertraining.com/reducing-leash-reactivity-the-engage-disengage-game>