



The Local Bark

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Overcoming Your Dog's Leash Reactivity

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When you take your dog for a walk, do you find yourself cringing every time you see another dog coming your way? Many dog owners dread these encounters, as they end up having to drag their dog away by the leash as it barks and lunges at the other dog. This behavior is known as “leash reactivity”: when a normally calm dog becomes aggressive towards other dogs while on a leash.

What causes leash reactivity?

The reasons for this can vary, but for the most part experts believe that leash reactivity occurs because leashes prevent dogs from engaging with other dogs as they normally would. Dogs typically check each other out by approaching one another in a curving, arcing path. They wag and avoid eye contact, instead sniffing each other’s sides and hindquarters. Once they’ve made this initial greeting, only then do they make eye contact and sniff one another’s faces.

However, being secured on a leash and having to walk down a narrow sidewalk makes it impossible for dogs to approach each other in this safe, low-stress manner. Instead, they immediately make eye contact and then have to walk straight into one another. With dogs, as with most animals, this is a major social faux pas—it signals aggressiveness and heightened tension. Additionally, both dogs know that they can’t get away from one another because of their leashes, making them even more stressed. This tension is reinforced when owners anticipate their dog’s reactions and start pulling hard on leashes and/or sternly telling their dogs to behave—all this does is confirm the dogs’ shared belief that the situation is bad. The predictable consequence is that the dogs lose control, and blow up aggressively.

If your dog does this when being taken out for a walk on a leash, but otherwise gets along just fine with other dogs when in a dog park or some other environment where it’s off-leash, then it’s almost certain that your dog is displaying leash reactivity. While many people spend years

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dragging their dog past every dog they come across—or just walk their dog in the middle of the night to avoid the situation altogether—leash reactivity is actually a fixable issue.

The trick to this is actually pretty simple: take a situation that your dog doesn't like (being on a leash and seeing another dog), and give him a reason to like it. And how do you do this?

Treats. Of course. For this, you'll want to use a treat that your dog absolutely *loves*, or something special that he normally doesn't get.

First step: Consistently getting your pup's attention.

So first off, work on being able to get your dog's attention, no matter where you're at. In order to change your dog's emotional reaction to other dogs, you have to be able to get his attention in the first place. First practice in your home, then move to progressively more busy areas: your backyard, an empty sidewalk, a sidewalk next to a street with cars driving down it, etc. All that is involved at this stage is just getting him to look at you when you say his name, or another verbal cue, such as "watch me." When he does this successfully, give him a treat. Lots of repetition, treats, and praise are key. During the phase when you're building your dog's ability to focus on you, do your best to avoid the trigger of other dogs. The more your dog "practices" the unwanted reactive behavior, by being confronted with dogs before he's adequately prepared, the harder it is to break the habit.

When he can do this consistently, then you can practice in an area where you're likely to spot other dogs, such as the area outside of a dog park, where you can see people walking their dogs but where you have plenty of room to move away if your dog starts to fixate or react. If you have a friend with a dog who can work with you on this, that's fantastic. Determine the distance from which your dog can see other dogs, while still keeping his cool. This is called a "threshold." The goal is to have your dog see another dog, but still be under that threshold, and thus be relaxed enough to turn his attention to you and take a treat.

Next: Getting your dog to associate the presence of other dogs with good things.

Now, when your dog first takes notice of another dog, *immediately* say his name (or the verbal cue you've chosen) to get him to look at you, and then praise him and give him a treat. Don't give him any time to negatively react to the dog—you have to be fast. If your dog starts barking at the other dog or otherwise misbehaves before you can get his attention, then your dog is over his threshold and you need to back off a little ways further before you try again.

The idea is that you want your dog to associate seeing other dogs with something good: in this case, getting really tasty treats. Don't just stop with one treat. When your pup looks at a dog, get his attention and give him a treat. Wait for him to start looking at the other dog again, then get his attention again and boom, another treat. Repeat repeat repeat, for as long as the other dog is close enough to catch your dog's attention. When the other dog passes out of range,

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stop giving treats and praise. Don't even look at your dog—just sit calmly. When another dog comes into range and your dog notices, start the process over again. You need to display a marked difference in your behavior when a dog comes nearby (happy talking, petting, lots of treats), and when there aren't any other dogs around (quiet, calm, not interacting with your dog at all). Make sure, however, that you are not contributing to your dog's negative excitement when he sees other dogs. The increase in adrenaline is what prevents your dog from making the choice to not react. The better you are about this, the more quickly your dog will make that positive association between other dogs and your behavior. You want your dog to become happy when he spots a dog, because other dogs = lots of treats and a happy owner lavishing him with love. When working with clients to overcome leash reactivity issues, we tell them that we want their dogs to think "dog = chicken."

When you can do this consistently, move a bit closer to where the dogs are passing by, and start over. If your dog gets cranky, don't yell or punish him. Just scoot back a bit, and try again. The ultimate goal is to get you and your pup on the walking path, and to be able to continually reengage his attention and reward him with lots of treats and loving, rather than having to drag a panicked, upset pup away from an unpleasant confrontation.

Take your time: Dealing with leash reactivity is a *process*.

This process can take a long time, so be patient. As we said before, *don't* punish negative behavior. Your dog is acting out because he's extremely stressed by the presence of another dog, and not having the ability to approach with caution. If you punish him, you'll only reinforce his belief that the presence of other dogs while having a leash on means that bad things are going to happen. This process is all about positivity: flushing out all those old negative feelings about strange dogs and replacing them with happy associations. With time, patience, and plenty of treats, soon you'll have your dog taking his walks like the well-behaved champ you've always dreamed of.

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