

Reactivity in Dogs

What is reactivity? *Reactivity* can include a variety of behaviors that a dog exhibits in response to a particular person, animal, or object. A dog with reactivity may bark, lunge, growl, or bite. They may also freeze, stare at, or pull towards the trigger they are reacting to.

Why does my dog react this way? Reactivity stems from a dog's intense emotional response to a particular trigger. The dog gets excited either in a positive or a negative way in response to seeing, hearing, or smelling the trigger. This often occurs when dogs are restricted by a leash, fence, or window. Leashes and barriers restrict freedom of motion, causing dogs to feel increasingly vulnerable or frustrated. As the intensity of those emotions rises, the dog displays reactive behavior.



Tips for Managing Your Dog's Reactive Behavior

Prevention through management strategies is the first step toward [reducing reactivity](#). Dogs with continuing or escalating reactive behavior should work with a qualified trainer long-term.

Tip 1: Avoid Triggers

Avoid situations where your dog will likely be exposed to their triggers. This may mean altering your daily walking route.

Tip 2: Reward Attention

Teach your dog that [checking in with you is highly](#) rewarding. Whenever they look back at you or give you eye contact while you walk, give them a treat.

Tip 3: Keep a Soft Leash

Avoid creating tension in the leash. Instead, aim to create a valley in the leash as you walk. Use humane and comfortable walking gear.

Tip 4: Reward Your Dog for Noticing the Trigger

If you encounter the trigger, reward your dog for calmly noticing it. You can also reward your dog for offering you attention as noted above. Use a [clicker](#) for clear communication!

Tip 5: Distract Your Dog

If you encounter the trigger, use tasty treats to lure your dog in another direction.

Tip 6: Move Away from the Trigger

Help reduce reactive behavior by giving your dog space away from the trigger. Calmly walk away. It can help to move out of sight and earshot from the trigger.

Tip 7: Give Your Dog a Break!

It can take hours for stress hormones to leave the body after a reactive incident. Give your dog time and space to recover after they show reactive behavior.

For more resources, check out <https://sfhumanesociety.org/behavior-library/>.