

My Dog Is Reactive Towards Other Dogs On Leash - What Should I Do?

Why does my dog act this way?

Some dogs, due to their individual personality and breed, are prone to be more high-strung when interacting with other dogs. Past experiences with other dogs and how they experience meeting with dogs on leash on an everyday basis are also critical to whether your dog develops leash reactivity. Basically, how well the dog has been socialized and feels comfortable meeting with other strange dogs on the street influences their reactivity. With rescue dogs this is always difficult as we often don't know anything of their past experiences with other dogs or the lack thereof.

What can I do to prevent this problem from occurring in the first place?

It is very easy to get lulled into false security with a puppy because they are so cute and they don't start out reactive, this is something that develops over time. Therefore, it is very important to take puppies out early on and socialize them around a wide variety of other friendly dogs, both puppies and adults.

This is one of the reasons we offer puppy socials every Saturday morning; to provide a venue for puppy owners to socialize their dogs with other puppies. In these puppy sessions members from our training team are always present and we teach owners what to look out for and how to actively be involved with the puppies to ensure good experiences. We divide the puppies into suitable smaller groups based on size and play style. We intervene and redirect puppies when it gets a bit rough. In addition we constantly provide reinforcement using treats. This creates the groundwork for an adult dog that is comfortable around other dogs on leash or off. It is important to remember that this process needs to continue well into adulthood. There is a period between 6 months to about 2 years where most of these issues tend to pop up so the socialization needs to be maintained over quite some time.

Out on the street, a puppy needs to learn that some dogs you can meet and greet and some you cannot, and that it is not the puppy's choice to make. We do not want to create frustration at the end of the leash with a dog who is straining and lunging to get to every other dog he sees. That can build up a lot of aggravation in your dog, turn the other dog into reactive mode against yours, and sets the stage for a very bad habit. A good way for an owner to make meeting other dogs on leash uneventful is to walk the dog regularly with other dog owners and their dogs on leash. Also, keep communicating with the dog during walks. Make sure you can get your dog's attention and that you can ask him to perform various obedience cues also when other dogs are around. The person walking the dog needs to proactively set the dog up for success.

When you adopt a dog who is a bit older, you need to find out as much as possible about his history with other dogs (foster home experiences or any interactions with other dogs in the shelter, etc.) even if very limited. If possible, start right away walking him with other dogs on leash. If you know people with solid dogs (dogs who are confident and good communicators), walk them together and if things go well consider letting them interact off leash, using long lines first so you quickly can separate them if necessary.

At all times make sure you do not put your dog in situations where they practice inappropriate reactions toward other dogs. For example, do not keep the dog tied out on the lawn or confined in a fenced yard where a lot of dogs go by it will make your dog charge, lunge and bark at the fence.

My dog is reactive – what do I do?

If you have a dog that is reactive, first find out if it applies to all situations or if it is limited to a certain context. For example:

- Is your dog reactive to small and/or big dogs?
- Is your dog reactive to female and/or male dogs?
- Is your dog reactive only in your neighborhood and/or other places as well
- Is your dog able to go to a dog park and interact off leash or is he reactive both off and on leash?
- Does your dog have other doggie playmates or not?

Mapping out your dog's reactivity gives you a much better idea of the scope of your problem and helps you determine your action plan.

The first step with a reactive dog is to practice obedience to make sure you have as much control as possible over your dog, even if this means only at a distance from other dogs at the initial stage. When no other dogs are around your dog should be able to respond to (1) sit, (2) down, (3) stay and/or wait, (4) walk on leash without pulling, (5) focused attention, (6) touch, and (7) leave it.

Second, in order for your dog to change his behavior he needs to be managed in such a way that he does not have an opportunity to practice the old behavior you are trying to get rid of on a regular basis. This means walking him at times when not every one else is walking their dogs, or even driving him to a more open space and dog free area. Separate exercise and neighborhood walks as much as possible as your neighborhood walks need to focus on your dog responding to you.

Third, any encounter with other dogs need to be made as pleasant as possible. If your dog sees a dog at a distance, give him a treat. Any visual of another dog should mean bonus points in terms of chicken, hotdogs or lunch meat...things he would never get any other time.

Last, distance is your friend...if your dog ignores any of your cues, is not even taking the hotdogs, and shows with his body language he is getting tense and/or upset then all you can do is as quickly as possible walk away to increase the distance and lower the pressure.

How does a Reactive Dog class work?

Our class is designed to first make the dogs comfortable in the classroom setting, then determine a baseline reactivity level for each dog, and then work with each dog at their individual pace. We take steps and use equipment (e.g. covered x-pen) to ensure each dog has an environment suitable for learning.

Over the course of the class, our goal is to increase a dog's comfort level around other dogs while minimizing any reactivity. The main approach for this is using counter-conditioning and desensitization. The counter-conditioning part consists of exposing each dog to other dogs while making it a good experience using

high-value treats. The desensitization part consists of increasing the intensity level gradually which includes both distance from the other dog and the level of motion involved and from what angle. Every exercise is intended to challenge the dog a bit more but to make sure to keep the dogs sub-threshold (below the reactivity level).

We have a few themes that are recurring throughout each class:

- Practice obedience cues and leash manners, making sure all dogs in the space can respond to their handlers and are under control around the other dogs
- Counterconditioning and desensitization exercises to make the dogs feel more comfortable about being around each other
- Engage the dog in fun and de-stressing activities in between the dog-to-dog interaction sessions by using agility equipment, puzzle games with treats, and shaping exercises.
- Relaxation exercise on a mat

How much will the Reactive Dog class help?

The benefit of the reactive class is two-fold:

- Give the students a weekly practice opportunity around other dogs, which helps with owner confidence and handling skills around other dogs. The more assured handling approach from the handler helps the dog feel more comfortable as well.
- Help the dogs feel more comfortable around each other and learn to cope with closer proximity to other dogs.

How much your dog will improve in class depends on how much you work with the dog between classes and how reactive the dog was to begin with. For some dogs the change is more drastic than for others. In either event it provides you with a solid platform from which to continue working with your dog.