

Companion Animal Psychology

By award-winning author Zazie Todd, PhD. Happy cats. Happy dogs. Thanks to science.

Reactive Dogs: Compassion and the Power of Animal Learning are at the Heart of Training

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What to do if your dog is reactive to other dogs or other people on walks.



Photo: Page Light Studios/Shutterstock.

Guest post by Beth Sautins CTC

Leash Reactivity, sometimes referred to as leash aggression, is when a dog reacts *in a big way* to things they see or hear while walking on leash. Common reactive behaviors include barking, pulling, lunging, growling, and snapping. Working with a dog who exhibits reactivity on leash walks is a journey with some challenging twists and turns. At the heart of training a reactive dog is understanding your dog's behavior, learning to help them cope, and teaching them more positive skills on leash.

Over the course of behavior modification for leash reactivity, your job description as your dog's handler will change. First, you'll be their empathizer and protector, then advocate and public relations manager, and finally teacher and cheerleader. Putting your heart into this process will help you and your dog improve both your walks and your bond with each other.

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Empathy first

When you experience your dog barking, lunging, or growling, empathy may not be the first reaction that comes to mind! It's more likely that you feel disappointed, frustrated, or embarrassed; leash reactivity can feel like a public relations nightmare! These feelings are entirely understandable, especially when you see other people and dogs walking happily along and wonder why your own dog seems incapable of it.

Understanding that your dog is having trouble coping is the first step towards compassion for your dog-- and for yourself too! While it might seem that reactive dogs are being purposefully disobedient, nothing could be further from the truth. These outbursts are not any more fun for your dog than they are for you. Your dog is so stressed-- either from fear or frustration-- that they resort to barking, lunging, and the like.

It can take a leap of faith to accept the idea that your dog is having a hard time and needs your help, but embracing this outlook is key to keeping you motivated during the training process. See "[Confidence and Emotions Affect People's Use of Positive Reinforcement to Train Reactive Dogs](#)" to learn more about the human aspects of reactive dog training.

Preventing outbursts

Preventing as many reactive episodes as possible is one of the first keys to making progress with your dog's training. Every time a dog has a reactive episode, their stress level increases, and they have more opportunities to practice the undesirable behaviors you're trying to modify.

While it's impossible to prevent every reactive outburst, you can use management strategies to reduce these counterproductive episodes. Consider walking your dog in less busy environments, at quiet times of day, and choosing non-walk enrichment alternatives to give you and your dog a much-needed break from the stress.

Here are some fun ideas when you need a break from dog walking:

- Puzzle toys (such as [dog brick from Nina Ottosson](#) or a [snuffle mat](#))
- Play tug, fetch, or use a flirt pole like [Squishy Face Studio Flirt Pole V2](#) or the [Outward Hound Tail Teaser](#) for some fun exercise
- Snuggling, massage, or brushing (if your dog likes these activities)
- Drive to a quiet place and take a relaxing stroll (let your dog stop and sniff!)



Photo: Humphrey Muleba/Pexels

Public relations

Having a dog who is reactive can garner some unwanted attention in your neighborhood. You might get some weird looks, questions, and worst of all, unsolicited advice about what to do with your dog. How should you deal with this when you just want a peaceful walk? It's tough to have empathy for your dog at these times, but it's important to remember your dog is having a hard time. As a caring dog owner, it's your job to let people know that your dog is learning to cope and is in training. Here are some tips for getting through tough walks:

- Say, "My dog is in training; please give us space." and keep moving.
- Put your hand up like a stop sign to get people to stop moving towards you.

- Consider a [“Please give me space” vest](#) for your dog if you need it!

These episodes can make us question ourselves and our training plan, and it’s important to acknowledge that self-doubt. Give yourself a moment to process those feelings and then remember that you’re on the right track. Down the line when your dog’s behavior is improving, those same doubters may congratulate you!



This "Please give me space" vest is from [Give A Dog A Home on Etsy](#)

Helping your dog learn to cope

The most effective way to help a dog with reactivity is desensitization and counter-conditioning. See [“What is Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning in Dog Training?”](#) for a deeper dive into the topic.

Here’s how to get started: You will expose your dog to triggers (distractions that they react to) at a level they can handle and that they don’t react to, while also using treats to make a positive association to these triggers. You can teach them to make positive associations with these triggers by giving them delicious food after they notice the trigger.

If your dog gets to eat yummy steak every time they notice another dog, they will gradually make a more positive association with seeing dogs. You can actually change their emotions using the power of classical conditioning! This is absolutely essential to long-term success. Other training methods that only keep dogs busy around triggers don’t get to the heart of the issue -- your dog’s negative emotions around triggers.

Learning at a safe distance

If a dog is barking, lunging, and growling at the sight of a trigger, they are not going to be in the best position to learn, which is why we want to start where they can stay relatively calm. As they begin to change their associations to triggers, we can move closer to the triggers and stay successful. Be careful not to reduce distances too quickly.

If you unexpectedly get too close to a trigger, don't worry too much - there is no way to avoid all outbursts during training. Keep an eye on any trends or patterns in your dog's reactions to triggers, and let your dog's body language and overall stress level be your guide. If your dog acts out at triggers they previously could tolerate, or is showing signs of stress or anxiety for long periods after reactive episodes, give them more distance from triggers and rebuild from there.

Teaching better choices

After your dog is progressing with desensitization and counter-conditioning, it's a prime time to teach them new behavior options such as focusing on you and walking past distractions that triggered them in the past. These skills don't have to be complicated, and in fact, keeping it simple will make it easier for both you and your dog. Skills like eye contact (looking at you instead of distractions), hand target (touching their nose to your hand), and leave it (ignoring something) are all you need!

Getting support for you and your dog

Having a reactive dog can be isolating- reach out for support and training help. A [qualified trainer](#) can offer their expertise, support, and encouragement throughout the behavior modification process. Reactivity Training works well both virtually and in person. Consider the course on [Doggy Geeks University](#) called [Drama Free Dog Walks: Real-Life Solutions for Reactivity](#). This is a self-paced online course with support from the student community, and from the instructors, Beth Sautins (CTC) and Mary Angilly (CTC, CPDT-KA). Individual support is available from the instructors if you need additional help. A [free mini-version of the course](#) is available to help get dogs and people on the road to better walks!

Summary

Dog walks with your reactive dog can be difficult both physically and mentally, and often challenge preconceived notions of proper dog behavior. Embracing compassion for your dog's stress, and acknowledging your own feelings about your dog's behavior is important for motivating you to follow through on a training plan. By addressing your dog's emotions and teaching them more positive choices, you and your dog will be able to enjoy calmer, more joyful walks for years to come.



Beth Sautins loves to help people learn more about their dogs so that they can live harmoniously together. She owns and operates [True Compass Dog Partners](#), working as a business coach and logistics consultant for dog trainers and veterinarians. Beth is an honors graduate of the Academy for Dog Trainers and administers [Doggy Geeks University](#), an online learning platform for people and their dogs. She lives and works in Colorado, spending her free time taking long sniffing walks with her adopted hound dog Iris.

Beth says thank you to [Mary Angilly](#) for her help with this post.

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