



Leash Reactivity Handbook

Reactivity – Why Does it Happen?

What does it mean to call a dog “reactive?” **Reactivity doesn’t have anything to do with aggression.** It’s also not a catch-all term for dogs who bark or lunge at things. When a dog is reactive, it means that they are not *thinking*; they are simply *reacting* to their emotions. The front part of the brain (the part in charge of thinking and reasoning) and the hind part of the brain (the part in charge of emotions) have an inverse relationship in that they do not tend to function well together. So when we’re thinking and reasoning, we tend to be less emotional, because that part of the brain is shut off, and when we’re emotional, we tend to be thinking less rationally, because *that* part of the brain is shut off. When dogs become emotionally overwhelmed when they see a certain trigger, the thinking part of their brain shuts off and they go into reactive mode, in which they will react in whatever way their fight or flight brain tells them to—typically by lunging and/or barking to scare the perceived threat away, though sometimes they may panic and try to flee as well. The reason that leash reactivity typically displays as aggression (though again, it has nothing to do with how the dog may *actually* feel about that trigger when they’re able to *think* clearly) is because **when a dog is on a leash, they can no longer flee.** So if they become fearful or anxious, or the fight-or-flight response is activated, they will **have** to fight and scare off the perceived threat before it can harm them. Oftentimes, owners accidentally *create* reactive dogs by having their dog frequently greet strange people or dogs on walks. If the dog doesn’t **want** to greet strange people or dogs, this can quickly lead to a dog who becomes anxious any time they see a strange person or dog on walks and may start barking or lunging to scare it away before they can approach it.

A reactive dog simply **has not been given tools to manage their feelings about their triggers, or control their emotional impulses, in a healthy way**, so they resort to instinctive “**distance-increasing**” behavior (barking and lunging almost always works to make people/dogs go away so it’s very effective behavior for them to use!).

Alternatively, sometimes dogs are reactive on leash or behind a fence, gate, or window (more broadly referred to as “barrier reactive,” as all of these things are barriers to the dog’s intentions) simply because they want to interact with the person/animal on the other side, and the barrier (whether it’s a leash, fence, gate, etc) prevents them from being able to do so, so they react with frustration, which looks the same as aggression to us. However, it’s important to know that they often are not acting aggressively towards the trigger, but reacting to their own frustration, which they don’t have an outlet for. **We can eliminate the emotional reaction by desensitization or by reinforcing other behaviors.**

Management

While going out on walks is often very enriching and a great stress reliever for dogs, it often has the **opposite** effect for reactive dogs, causing **more** stress for your dog (and you!) and tipping them over their threshold, so you’re not only losing the benefit of the walk, but you’re actually adding to your dog’s stress and anxiety level—which is the opposite of our goal for walks! However, it’s for this reason (and because the more your dog is able to rehearse reactive behavior, the stronger the behavior becomes, and the more you have to train to change it) that reactive dogs should **completely avoid their triggers as much as possible** during training. That means if you have a fenced in yard and your dog is reactive on leash, there should be **no reason** to go for a walk—unless it’s for a planned, set aside

training scenario—until the dog is no longer reactive. If you don't have a fenced in yard, make your dog's walks as short as possible, basically just long enough for them to go to the bathroom, and don't stray any further from your home than necessary, and replace the enrichment your dog would've gotten from a walk with other enrichment, such as a filled, frozen Kong or other food puzzle, game of fetch/tug, or training session! Other options may be walking your dog at times/locations when you're not likely to encounter triggers (later at night, earlier in the morning, etc), or **Sniff Spot**, a website/app that allows people to list their private property for you to rent out for your dog! But in general, the **more** you can avoid your dog's trigger, the faster the process of **changing** the behavior will be.

General Leash Skills

Equipment

Equipment also plays a huge part in your dog's behavior on walks. A front clip (or chest) harness is always recommended, unless there are medical restrictions that make another type of harness necessary. Harnesses that clip on the back allow the dog extra leverage to pull, and make it harder to control them physically. A six-foot flat leash is the most common versatile leash to use for basic walking; if you are in area in which your dog can have a little more freedom to explore and sniff, then **a long leash (10 feet or more) is a great option**, and they come in any length imaginable. Having the extra room to sniff keeps stress levels lower and makes it easier to teach loose leash walking skills, as it often prevents their need to pull in the first place, thus allowing you to reward appropriate behavior more often. Also, with reactive dogs, the pressure from the leash is what often causes frustration to build, leading to reactivity. With a longer leash, the dog will feel less pressure in general and be less likely to react.

We recommend **Petsafe Easy Walk brand** harnesses, or any harness with a clip on the front, like this:



Avoid retractable leashes as they offer little control and can break easily or wrap around limbs and cause injuries. On top of the safety issues they present, they also do not encourage loose leash walking and **make it difficult for dogs to learn to walk on a loose leash, as the leash can never be loose**. Also, **any type of walking equipment that uses aversive techniques is not recommended** (such as prong collars, choke chains, or electronic collars) as they can cause permanent damage to your dog physically or even **increase** behavior issues due to the stress they can cause.

Teaching the Behavior

Lure your dog to your side with a treat and reward them. Then start walking. Now think of it like a "Treat Zone"—as long as your dog is near enough to your side to take a treat, they can have a treat! Be sure to

reward **frequently** at first, **even every step if necessary!** Over time as you practice, you can gradually start to reward **less** frequently (every **other** step, then every **three** steps, etc). If/when your dog starts to pull, stop walking, stand in place, and wait for them to come back to you and into the starting position. If they are too distracted or standing still at the end of the leash for more than 30 seconds or so, lure them back with a treat, but **don't give the treat immediately** in order to prevent a behavior chain of pulling then returning to your side. Wait until they've taken at least one step by your side to reward.

Pro Tip

- ★ Never try to teach a new skill in the environment/situation where it's needed. That means in this case, don't try to teach a dog to walk on a leash on an actual walk! Practice your leash skills by **starting in a familiar area that isn't very exciting to your dog**. This could be **inside the home, the yard, driveway, a familiar and quiet street**, etc. Practice the steps below first in the first location, and **then** move on to more novel and exciting areas—but do it **gradually!** For example, practice in your home first, **then** your backyard, **then** your porch area, **then** your front yard, **then** on the sidewalk, **then** in a quiet place in your neighborhood, **then** in a crowded public area, etc...

Get as many people as possible to practice *Loose Leash Walking* **every time** they walk a dog. Progress may be slow at first, but consistent practice will help dogs learn which behaviors are rewarded.

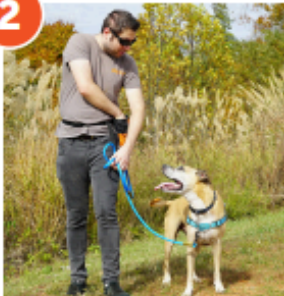
Hints: Hold the leash so it's slack when the dog is two feet from you. Always take along a pouch stocked with very tasty treats!

1



If the dog pulls forward at the end of the leash, stop and stand still.

2



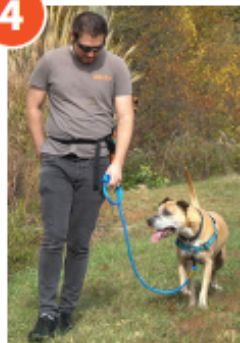
Wait for the dog to look at you or come within two feet of you.

3



Say "Yes!" and hold a tasty treat low enough that they can eat it without jumping up.

4



Continue your walk. During your walk, reward **every time** the dog looks at you or comes within two feet of you. Repeat this full process **every time** they pull.

TIP



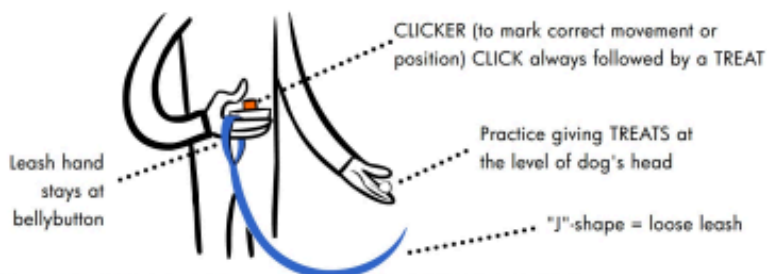
If the dog will not come within two feet of you for even a moment, hold treats in your hand so the dog must approach to eat them.

TEACHING YOUR DOG TO WALK POLITELY ON LEASH

PART ONE: Start in a small, boring space. Go at your dog's pace.

The most important step in teaching your dog to walk politely on leash is showing your dog where you want him to be while he is on leash.

To make things easier for your dog, start practicing in a small, boring space. This improves the odds that your dog will stay close to you.



PRACTICE WITH NO DOG

Practice clicking and feeding a treat at your pant seam, at the level of your dog's head.

PRACTICE WITH DOG

Practice holding the leash at your belly-button as you click and feed.

1



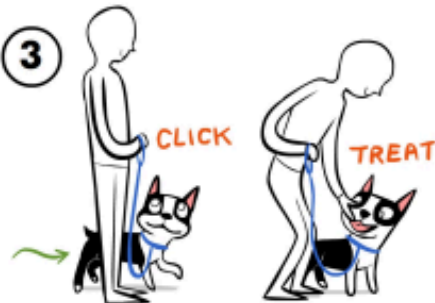
Click and treat rapidly a few times in the correct position.

2



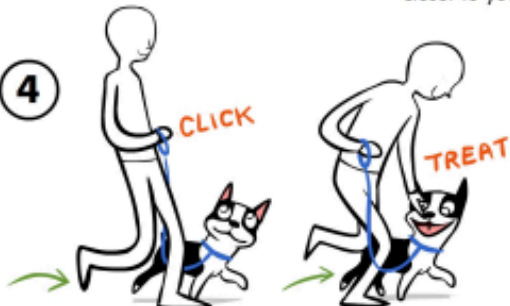
Move slightly out of heel position and wait for your dog to move closer to you.

3



As soon as your dog moves even the tiniest step closer to you, click and feed at the "ideal" head position.

4



Repeat until your dog moves into heel position every time you move out of it.

5



Gradually take more and more steps between clicks and treats. If your dog gets confused, go back to just one step and then increase the number of steps more slowly to help him understand.

6



Then start changing direction and speed.

7

Next, move to a larger or more interesting space, and start over from STEP 1. When your dog can handle STEP 6 in the new space, move to another new space, starting over from STEP 1 again.

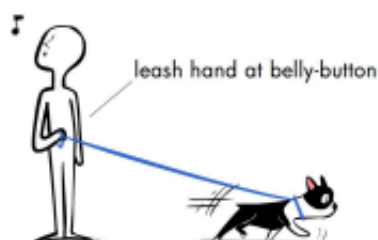
TEACHING YOUR DOG TO WALK POLITELY ON LEASH

PART TWO: Help! My Dog Is Pulling!

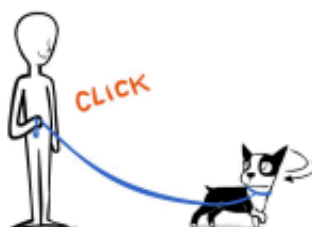


If pulling on the leash gets your dog where he wants to go, he'll keep pulling. To avoid teaching your dog that pulling is a good strategy, use one of the techniques described below.

TECHNIQUE 1: "I AM A ROCK"



When your dog pulls, stop in your tracks. Wait. As you wait, pretend you have no dog.



When your dog backs up or turns to you, click and feed a treat at your pant seam.

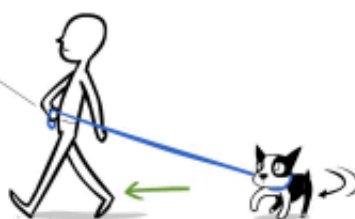


Then move forward again.

TECHNIQUE 2: "BACK & FORTH"



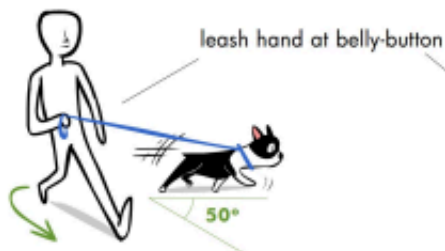
When your dog pulls, turn around and walk purposefully in the opposite direction. When your dog catches up to heel position...



Click and treat. Then turn around and continue in your original direction.



TECHNIQUE 3: "OFF AT AN ANGLE"



This is a great technique for dogs who are very strong. When your dog pulls, simply move away at a random angle that isn't 180 degrees.



Wait for your dog to catch up to heel position.



Click and treat. Then turn around and continue in your original direction again.



If your dog keeps pulling, the environment is probably too exciting. Go back to teaching your dog polite leash walking in a less exciting place. Then build up gradually to walking on leash in the exciting environment again.

Remember to go back to PART ONE every time you practice in a new place.

Counterconditioning

Counterconditioning (using classical conditioning to create a new emotional response to a trigger) creates a **new** association with the triggering stimulus for an animal (a stimulus that was previously scary to the animal is now exciting). The key with counterconditioning is that we are actively changing an animals' mind about how they feel about a certain stimulus by giving them something they really like **exclusively** in the presence of the stress-inducing stimulus. This will form a positive association with the trigger to replace the negative one.

1. First, it is critical for counter conditioning that you have identified your dog's highest-value reinforcer (reward), and that they do not have access to it outside of this training.
2. Begin in a quiet, non-distracting environment, if possible, where your dog is otherwise comfortable and relaxed. Determine at what intensity of the stimulus your dog begins to show any signs of distress. You should be as far away from the trigger as possible, or in a situation where the trigger is at the lowest intensity you can possibly get it.
3. Begin giving the high value treats the moment your dog sees/hears the stimulus. If your dog goes over threshold immediately and you have no time to get the reinforcement to them, try engaging them with play or treats before the stimulus so that they are more likely to be in a positive mindset when exposed to the stimulus. If they are still reacting as soon as the stimulus is present, just try to find the point where they show the least amount of stress/fear and start from there. The most important part of counterconditioning is finding the correct starting point so that you can increase the intensity gradually.
 - a. The point of counterconditioning is to create an association between a trigger and a reinforcer, **NOT** to address any particular behavior—meaning that your dog's behavior is irrelevant. Don't wait for your dog to perform a certain behavior before giving the reinforcer. The reinforcer **always** happens in the presence of the trigger, regardless of your dog's behavior. Changing the way an animal **FEELS** about a trigger will most likely change the animal's **behavior** (for example, changing fear to excitement means a dog won't have a reason to bark or lunge anymore).
 - b. Some examples of starting desensitization set-ups:
 - i. If your dog is fearful of/reactive to people, other animals, or certain spaces: start far enough away from the trigger that your dog isn't reacting (may be 100 yards or more at first)
 - ii. If your dog is fearful of sounds: start by playing a recording of the sounds at the **lowest** volume your dog can hear
 - iii. If your dog is fearful of a crate: start with just rewarding your dog for being **near** the crate
4. Remove the stimulus (move your dog away or have the stimulus go out of sight) and stop giving them reinforcement.
5. After a minute, introduce the stimulus again and repeat the exact same procedure several times.
 - a. Example: A person is standing behind a car or tree, then steps out into view, then steps behind the visual barrier again.
6. When your dog is expectantly looking to you for treats when they see/hear the stimulus or if they enter the stressful situation and show no signs of distress, it is time to increase the intensity of the stimulus (get closer, play the sound louder, stay in the situation longer, etc) by the smallest amount possible (one second, one inch/foot, etc)--or until your dog becomes uncomfortable again and starts showing signs of stress.
7. Now repeat several times.
 - a. If, at any time your dog begins to show fearful behaviors, you should **go back to the last step that you were successful with and repeat**. Or you can try making a smaller

increase (for example, instead of moving a foot closer, move **half** a foot closer).

8. Repeat steps 1-4, **gradually** increasing the intensity of the stimulus with each session until it is at the desired intensity (usually the intensity at which the stimulus will be encountered in your dog's daily life). Only go as fast as your dog will allow. If you try to go too fast, you may end up **sensitizing** your dog to the stimulus, which will cause them to be more afraid and create more work for yourself in the future.
 - a. The three elements of CC are: distance (how far away the animal is from the trigger), intensity (what the trigger is doing), and duration (how long the animal is exposed to the trigger). When you **increase** one of these elements, you must **decrease** the others.
 - i. Example:

	Distance	Intensity	Duration	Reinforcement (DURING duration)
1	50 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	1 second	Drop a few high value treats
2	50 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	2 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
3	50 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	3 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
4	50 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	4 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
5	50 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	5 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
6	50 feet	Helper dog is walking	1 second	Drop a few high value treats
7	50 feet	Helper dog is walking	2 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
8	50 feet	Helper dog is walking	3 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
9	50 feet	Helper dog is walking	4 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
10	50 feet	Helper dog is walking	5 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
11	49 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	1 second	Drop a few high value treats
12	49 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	2 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
13	49 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	3 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
14	49 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	4 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
15	49 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	5 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
16	49 feet	Helper dog is walking	1 second	Drop a few high value treats
17	49 feet	Helper dog is walking	2 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
18	49 feet	Helper dog is walking	3 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
19	49 feet	Helper dog is walking	4 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
20	49 feet	Helper dog is walking	5 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
21	48 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	1 second	Drop a few high value treats
22	48 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	2 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
23	48 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	3 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
24	48 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	4 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
25	48 feet	Helper dog is sitting/standing still	5 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
26	48 feet	Helper dog is walking	1 second	Drop a few high value treats
27	48 feet	Helper dog is walking	2 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
28	48 feet	Helper dog is walking	3 seconds	Drop a few high value treats
29	48 feet	Helper dog is walking	4 seconds	Drop a few high value treats

- ii. The goal is to keep your dog in the green or blue zones as often as possible (see diagram below). If/when your dog crosses over to the orange or red zones, learning can no longer happen and the only thing that can get them back down to yellow or lower is to increase the amount of space between them and the trigger.
9. ALWAYS end trials with success! Give a jackpot reward—playtime, favorite enrichment, bully stick, etc—after sessions to maximize your dog's excitement for learning and positive associations with triggers!

Notes:

- CC training is all about building a **new** response to a distressing stimulus. As such, all exposure to the stimulus you are attempting to counter condition your dog to must be **avoided** during the training process. If you progress too quickly, or your dog is exposed to the fearful stimulus in a non-controlled way and is over their threshold (see graphic at the end), it will likely set you back a step or two (or even more, depending on the dog). Once your dog encounters a trigger beyond their threshold (beyond what you've exposed them to in the training environment), you have switched from management/training to damage control, and the only goal is to get your dog out of the situation with as little damage done as possible.
- Best places for setting up CC sessions:
 - ◆ Large, empty field or park
 - ◆ Large, empty parking lot
 - ◆ Empty tennis court (they're usually fenced in too!)
 - ◆ Avoid trails/paths or wooded/forest areas, as you can't see very far ahead or around and so can't avoid triggers easily.

COUNTERCONDITIONING & DESENSITIZATION = Pairing Monsters with Very Good Things



1. Monsters ALWAYS cause Very Good Things
2. ONLY Monsters cause Very Good Things
3. Monsters must keep their DISTANCE, then, over many repetitions GRADUALLY get closer so that the dog is comfortable all the way through.

**It is important to have the LOVE of the Very Good Things
be stronger than the FEAR of the Monsters.**

After many repetitions of...



You get...



STRESS & SUPPORT SCALE

Stay On The Beach!

Dog's stress level is analogous to rising water level



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Training Exercises

"Check-Ins"

Teaching your dog to "check in" (look at you) is one of the most beneficial behaviors you can teach for helping your dog have better leash skills! The more they are looking at **you**, the less they will be able to pull towards distractions in the environment. Every time your dog looks at you—even if just for a **fraction of a second!**—mark the behavior and reward with a high value treat. You don't have to wait for perfect eye contact to start with—just as long as your dog turns their head toward you, that's a good

start. Gradually, as you reward this, your dog will look at you more and more, and you can start rewarding direct eye contact, and then waiting for a second or two before rewarding to get more, longer eye contact.

- Choose a **quiet, minimally distracting** environment to practice this in first. This can be your yard, porch, or patio. Then move to a quieter, calmer public area, far away from any distractions if they're present. Then you can gradually begin moving to busier, more distracting public areas.

“Engage Disengage”

The “Engage Disengage” game is an easy, structured way to practice reinforcing your reactive dog for behaviors **other** than reactivity **before** they can begin to engage in any reactive behavior. It is very helpful to use a clicker (or some sort of marker) for this exercise. A clicker/marker is just a way of marking a behavior that is going to be rewarded, so that your dog knows exactly what behavior is desired. For example, a dog sits on the ground when we ask them to sit, they may stand up before we can get the treat to them, and so they may think that actually standing up is what we wanted them to do, because that's what they were doing when they got the treat. Alternatively, if we **click** (or use a verbal marker like “Yes!,” something very short that sounds the same every time) then we have time to get the reinforcer to them without confusing your dog about what behavior is being reinforced. Clickers work so well because they make the exact same sound every time (unlike our voices) so they are very clear communication for dogs. You should “charge” your clicker/marker first by simply clicking (or saying the verbal cue) then **immediately** giving your dog a treat. Do this for a few minutes (can be broken up into multiple different sessions if necessary), and your dog should be reacting in a positive way to the marker now—and that's how you know it's charged and ready to be used as a marker!

THE ENGAGE-DISENGAGE GAME

A training game for dogs who are FEARFUL, ANXIOUS, or FRUSTRATED around a specific trigger such as another dog, person, or sound. The goal is to first decrease the dog's fear/anxiety/frustration and then to teach the dog a new safe and appropriate behavior to do instead.

PREP:

- ☐ High value treats
- ☐ Clicker (or verbal marker)
- ☐ Humane harness or collar
- ☐ Practice fast u-turns by luring your dog with a treat on his nose, or tossing "find-it" treats on the ground as you both walk away quickly in the opposite direction.

- ☐ Take a break if you see subtle stress signals (displacement behaviors) such as excessive lip licking, yawning, or scratching.



PLAY FOR 1-5 MINUTES. TAKE A BREAK. REPEAT.

LEVEL 1: ENGAGE

- 1** 

Start at a safe distance away from the trigger, where your dog is not reacting. Be quiet and still so your dog notices the trigger on his own.
- 2** 

CLICK!
At the precise moment your dog ENGAGES by looking at the trigger, CLICK!
- 3** 

When your dog turns his head towards you after the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 1 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row at the same distance before moving on to LEVEL 2. A successful repetition is when your dog immediately turns back to you after the click.

If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, keep playing LEVEL 1 until your dog has calmly looked at (or engaged with) the trigger from every direction. Then move on to LEVEL 2.

LEVEL 2: DISENGAGE

- 1** 

Let your dog notice the trigger again, but now wait 1-5 seconds to see if he will offer to LOOK AWAY from the trigger on his own.
If your dog is fixating on the trigger for longer than 5 seconds, GO BACK to LEVEL 1.
- 2** 

CLICK!
At the precise moment your dog DISENGAGES by looking away from the trigger, CLICK!
- 3** 

After the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 2 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row before moving 1-5 steps closer to the trigger. A successful repetition is when your dog comfortably disengages with the trigger on his own.

As you move closer, keep playing LEVEL 2 if the trigger is not moving or changing in intensity. If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, go back to LEVEL 1 at the new distance.