



Dog: Leash Reactivity

When out for a walk, does your dog bark, pull on leash or lunge at small animals, joggers, bicyclists, skateboarders or cars?

When our dogs are on leash, we restrict their freedom and ability to adjust their distance if they want to avoid or get closer to a person or object. Some dogs get frustrated when unable to negotiate the distance of space, and this frustration can manifest as barking, growling and/or lunging towards the people or objects – this is called “leash reactivity.”

How does leash reactivity develop?

- **Reacting to avoid:** With repeated occurrences, leash reactivity can develop when a dog is trying to create distance from a person or object that it perceives as a threat and wishes to avoid. The barking, growling and lunging behaviors are very clear messages for that person/object to stay away. If the strategy works, then this may be the tactic your dog utilizes whenever he is uncomfortable during a leash walk.
- **Reacting to get closer:** Secondly, it is not uncommon for dogs to become excitable on leash when they see fast moving objects, such as joggers, bicyclists, skateboarders, etc. Dogs are born predators and many want to chase after anything moving quickly, even in a playful way. When they try to give chase and are held back by the leash, their excitement may escalate to agitated barking and pulling because they cannot get to what they want. Some dogs may just want to enjoy a good chase, while in other dogs the chase behavior may escalate further into frustration, leading to leash reactivity.

In either case, with repeated exposures, a dog’s reaction becomes immediate as soon as he sees such a trigger – whether that is a skateboarder, bus, hat-wearing person, or squirrel.

What You Can Do About It

- **Redirect your dog’s attention.** Take high value treats with you. When you see the trigger, immediately ask your dog to “look” at you for a tasty reward. Keep his attention on you by asking him to perform “sit”, “touch” or “find it” (see handouts) for the food rewards. Sometimes jogging a few steps with you can help keep your dog’s attention focused on you or just on moving forward.
- **Avoidance.** You can avoid the trigger by ducking behind a car or tree or by crossing the street. You can teach your dog to “turn” (see *180 turn* handout) and walk in the opposite direction. You can also jog with your dog in the opposite direction.
- **Use humane walking equipment.** A head halter, such as the Gentle Leader or Halti, or a front buckle harness such as an Easy Walk or Balance harness, can make management of your dog easier on walks. These tools do not physically hurt your dog. Choke, pinch, and shock collars are punishment tools designed to cause pain and discomfort in order to inhibit behavior and should never be used. Your dog may stop barking and lunging due to the pain from the equipment; however, the risk that your dog will associate the pain/discomfort with the presence of the other dog is significant. Your

dog's reaction towards other dogs may worsen due to pain, fear and anxiety. Sometimes dogs are so mentally agitated that they block out the pain from the collars and continue to escalate the behavior.

- **Feed your dog a smaller meal.** You can feed your dog the rest of his meal for performing his cued behaviors while on his walks. A hungrier dog will be more motivated to focus on you and work for his meal on walks.
- **Take a class.** Sometimes it is difficult to teach your dog how to behave on walks on your own. We offer reward-based behavior modification classes, such as *Reactive Rover* or *Focus: Attention, not Tension*, for dogs that are reactive to learn and practice those behaviors in a safe and supportive environment. Learn more at sfspca.org/training

If you cannot take a class or are unable to make progress, seek a behavior consultation with a qualified, positive-reinforcement trainer or the SF SPCA's board-certified veterinary behavior specialist.

For more information call 1.415.554.3030 or visit us online at sfspca.org