



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Lead Reactive Dogs

Does your dog bark and lunge uncontrollably when they see another dog when out on a walk?

Why DO dogs do that? Why is it when some dogs see another dog they sometimes act “aggressive” or “reactive”? And what does this look like? After all, any behaviour is a “reaction” (being calm is a reaction!) Barking, lunging, whining and pulling on the lead are usually the behaviours of concern for most people.

Reasons for behaviour

Behaviour is made up of 3 things:

- Genetics
- What the dog has learned previously
- The current situation

Motivation behind the behaviour

There can be many reasons why dogs “act” this way.

- The dog is afraid of the approaching dog and wants it to go away
- The dog is frustrated because it wants to get to the other dog to play
- The dog is warning the other dog to stay away because it usually gets reprimanded when dogs get too close to it, learning from previous experiences



Examples of dogs learning that other dogs near them can be bad:

- A young dog in a dog park being bullied or pushed by other dogs
- Your dog has not met another dog in some time (social skills need practice once they have been learned)
- Taking your dog for a walk and when another dog comes up to say hello, you have snapped back on the lead, or punished your dog when they try to jump on the other dog
- A dog off lead has raced up to your dog on lead and scared your dog.
- Your dog tries to play with another dog (well-meaning but rude) and the other dog snaps and snarls at him

Examples of dogs learning that every dog they see they can play with:

- The only interaction your dog gets with other dogs is full on play at a dog park with no breaks and often inappropriate play.
- They have never been taught to be calm around other dogs.
- Often, just one bad experience from your dog’s point of view, is all it may take to elicit these reactions in the future.



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- Or, if your dog has only learned that other dogs always mean play time, this can cause frustration in your dog and trigger a “reaction” when they see other dogs

The fight or flight response

In a stressful situation, for example when faced with seeing another dog too close, a dog can be faced with flight or fight. Because of previous experiences (being on a lead), the dog has learned that it can't flee or run away. So the only other option left for the dog is to fight. And this can look like the lunging and the barking behaviours that concern us.

But how do I “fix” it?

You may not be able to “fix” the problem, and certainly not overnight. However, we recommend a technique which may help to teach your dog to be calm when they see other dogs, and also teach them that any dogs' presence is a good thing.

The science behind this technique is called desensitisation (gradually exposing the dog to a situation - to help them be less sensitive) and counter conditioning, which means to teach your dog to have a pleasant feeling in response to something that he once feared or disliked (for example using food the dog likes).



Your behaviour

The first thing to think about is what do YOU do when your dog sees another dog? Are you relaxed and calm? Can you breathe? It may sound silly, but quite often we hold our breath when we are stressed and this can affect how our dog reacts.

You also need to try and relax your dog's lead. Keeping a tight lead can almost always increase your dog's concern.

Finding your dog's threshold or critical distance

At what distance can your dog be calm around other dogs on lead? Find this sufficient social distance and work forwards from there. Perhaps your dog can be calm and focussed on you with another dog 200 meters away, or it may be across the street. The point is to not start close and work backwards, but give your dog as much space as required at all times (this is called working sub-threshold) and work forwards. Keep any session short. The first session may last only a couple of seconds before taking a break.

For example, you can work at a sub-threshold distance from a dog park, as this gives you better control over the distance to the dogs, as the dogs inside the dog park are fenced (make sure you go at a quiet time so there are not too many dogs in the dog park to start with).



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Counter conditioning

Now the fun part begins. To teach your dog that good things happen when other dogs are around, you will need to work with your dog's favourite thing/s. This may be food or toys. If using food, try roast chicken, cheese or salami for example. Make sure the treats are soft and meaty as they are much easier to eat as opposed to dry liver treats, and use this special food only for your counter conditioning.

For example, your sessions may involve:

- 1) Bringing another dog into sight (use a friend's dog you know is calm around other dogs or you can use a calm dog in the dog park)
- 2) Treating your dog in a steady stream of pea-sized morsels as long as the other dog is in sight.
- 3) Watching your dog closely for any subtle signs of distress and removing the dog from the situation before the dogs becomes sensitized.
- 4) Stopping the treats as soon as the other dog is out of sight.

As long as you go gradually and at your dog's pace (all dogs are different with how they learn depending on previous experiences), you should be able to decrease the distance slightly at each session. Be careful to not start a new session at a distance closer than the last session. Always set your dog up for success!

It is usually helpful to engage a qualified trainer for the first few sessions to help get you started. Contact the RSPCA School for Dogs for help with designing a behaviour modification program specifically for your dog.

For further information, refer to our info sheets:

Canine body language, training dogs to overcome their fears and adrenalin levels.

Resources

Michaels, Drayton (2015), Misconceptions of Counterconditioning Leash Reactive Dogs, <https://barksfromtheguild.com/2015/06/29/misconceptions-of-counter-conditioning-leash-reactive-dogs/>

Mornement, Dr Kate (2016), Lead Reactivity Part 1: How it develops and why it's a liability, <http://katemornementanimalbehaviourist.blogspot.com/2016/11/lead-reactivity-part-1-how-it-develops.html>

Mornement, Dr Kate (2016), Lead Reactivity Part 2: How to avoid or resolve it, <http://katemornementanimalbehaviourist.blogspot.com/2016/12/lead-reactivity-part-2-how-to-avoid-or.html?spref=fb>

Urban Dawgs, Cognition & Memory - Leash Reactivity - Less Stress More Success, <https://youtu.be/3iyjdBKYRGY>