



METRO NASHVILLE
ANIMAL CARE & CONTROL

LEASH REACTIVITY

Does your dog lunge, growl and bark at the end of his leash when he sees an unfamiliar person, dog or object? If so, he is displaying something called “leash reactivity.” This behavior can be scary if you’re experiencing it for the first (or even hundredth) time. Fortunately, you can do something about this behavior.

WHY IS MY DOG DOING THIS?

There are two main reasons why dogs display leash reactivity: fear or frustration.

A fearful dog wants to get away from the thing she’s afraid of, so she displays distance-increasing body language, such as snarling and growling. It’s her way of saying, “Hey, you! You make me uncomfortable! Stay away from me!”

A frustrated dog, on the other hand, displays distance decreasing body language, such as playful barking and bounciness. It’s his way of saying, “Hey, you look fun! Come meet me!”

The first step in working with your dog’s reactivity is to determine the underlying cause behind the behavior through his body language. **Is he fearful or frustrated? The answer to that question can shape the behavior modification approach you use.**

WHAT DOES THE LEASH HAVE TO DO WITH THIS BEHAVIOR?

Because of a perceived threat in the environment, a fearful dog’s body is undergoing a physiological phenomenon called “fight or flight.” The leash creates an inability to flee and without that ability, a fearful dog will instead try to create distance through “fight” (e.g., snarling and growling) behaviors. For a frustrated dog, the leash is keeping her from doing what she wants, adding to the frustration.

Also, your stress can be communicated to your dog via the leash, which can add to her stress. So, try to keep the leash loose rather than taut, and take slow, deep and even breaths in order to help yourself feel calmer. Do not yell or raise your voice, because this can increase your dog’s fear or frustration since she thinks you are afraid as well.

Keep in mind that leash reactivity doesn't necessarily mean that your dog is aggressive toward people or other dogs. In fact, many dogs who show leash reactivity do not show these behaviors off-leash.

FOLLOW THESE GUIDELINES FOR WALKING:

- Fill your pockets or treat bag with delicious treats before every walk.
- Use the walking tool of your choice. Front clip harnesses, gentle leaders, and martingale collars are examples. A front clip harness is much easier than a spine clip harness for steering your dog away from triggers. Always keep your dog on a leash. Retractable leashes are difficult to manipulate with reactive dogs and should be avoided.
- To help your dog focus on something else, teach your dog to "look" or "the name game." To teach "look", train your new dog to look at your face by holding a treat next to your eye or on your nose, whichever you prefer. Ask your dog to "look" or "this way." When he or she does, say YES! and give the treat. Practice this first inside and then on walks when there are no other dogs.
- Try to avoid dogs for the first week after you take the dog home. Practice the "look" or "name game" exercises many times on your walks. Also ask your dog to move with you as you put the treats in front of your dog's mouth. After your dog moves with you, then ask your dog to sit.
- When you see your first dog, use your treats to lure your dog away from the other dog and keep walking. Do this even if your dog is not reactive. When you see that your dog is not being reactive, ask your dog to look at you and sit; then, praise and give her the treat.
- Sometimes the easiest thing to do when you're surprised by a trigger is to put a visual barrier between it and your pup. If your dog can't see their trigger, they're far less likely to react to it, even if they know it's there. The best barriers are large and solid such as parked cars. Stepping in front of your dog to use your own body as a visual barrier is unlikely to work very well. You can also practice body blocking so that you are blocking your dog's sight of whatever is triggering him/her. Teaching your dog to heel will help this process.
- If your dog is reactive to every dog you see, most likely you are getting closer to the other dogs than your dog can tolerate. Try to increase the distance from the other dogs so that your dog is not reactive.
- Until you get to know your dog's off-leash behavior, do not attempt to go to dog parks. If you have a safe fenced-in yard, you can try to plan play time with one of your friend's dog-friendly dogs.
- Sign up for an obedience class with a trainer who can handle reactive dogs using positive reinforcement and low-stress handling techniques. Make sure you let the trainer know about your dog's reactivity.

Resources:

<https://centerforshelterdogs.tufts.edu/dog-behavior/>

<https://network.bestfriends.org/lifesaving-library/dog-resources/dealing-leash-reactivity>