



Dog Talk LLC – Dog Talk Media – Maureen Ross MA

Reactivity vs Aggression

A dog displaying signs of reactivity is not necessarily aggressive. It is important to realize the difference between the two states of being to prevent a reactive dog from crossing the threshold into anger and hostility.

Reactive has taken on many meanings in the dog world of training and behavior. It causes feelings of anxiety, trepidation and fear. Many believe it means the dog is aggressive or hostile. Our perception of reactive often correlates with a range of unpleasant, problematic behaviors, like barking, lunging or charging at people, other dogs or a bush! A dog “labelled” as reactive is not always a threat. Let’s explore this ...

Thousands of shelter dogs waiting for adoption may have a long wait unless the behaviors that label them reactive are understood by experienced volunteers, staff, and are assessed and rehabilitated, before joining a new family. Some of these dogs have been neglected, poorly socialized, even physically abused. Sad to share, that some dogs are physically abused through the type of training approaches that are still being used. The label may say “demonstrates reactivity”. What the heck does that mean to a family or individual wanting to adopt a dog and/or people who have experienced this behavior with their dogs?

Existing dog parents often notice reactive predispositions in their dogs – barking or growling at noises, bikers and just walking. Understanding what you are noticing, and what you do, can make a big difference when it comes to obtaining appropriate behavior intervention.

DEFINING REACTIVITY

Reactivity is not synonymous with aggression. Reactivity is very real when we experience it with our dogs (barking, jumping, lunging, growling). Many people laugh it off, especially with puppies, reinforcing the behavior as OKAY. Do not assume that reactive behaviors will not become aggressive. Generally, dogs do not grow out reactivity - especially if it seemingly solves their stressed-out situation – like the other dog went away or came over!

Steve Frost, Animal Enrichment and Behavior Manager at Chicagoland based Anderson Animal Shelter shares that “A dog displaying reactive behaviors isn’t giving us a hard time; he’s letting us know he’s having a hard time.” Steve clarifies that “shelter workers watch closely for signs of overt anxiety or aggravation in the dogs in their care. The goal is not to stigmatize, label or

oversimplify. In average animal shelters, reactive signs are on display almost daily. It’s important to help everyone understand the precise patterns being observed.”

From my experience over the last twenty years with dogs, including my own, even the best trained dogs can cross a threshold when in an unfamiliar, stressful environment, causing them to go into fight or flight mode. It is one of those “what the heck was that” moments that you’d rather redo to get it better or forget completely. If the dog can make something stop - or satisfy them - the same behavior will be used again. It is to our benefit to be “aware” of what is going on around our dogs on walks, in a car, on a therapy visit or walking at the beach.

As an experienced trainer and behavior coach, “thresholds” play a key role in defining and understanding reactive behaviors in dogs that are often inadvertently shaped by dog owners/handlers. Consider a continuum of progressive behaviors. On encountering a trigger – for example – a ringing doorbell, human visitors or another pet, some dogs will remain consistently relaxed and calm. Others will cross a threshold and begin to demonstrate one or more overzealous responses. Others may escalate further into unsafe, aggressive behaviors.

Consequently, many new dog parents will jog to the door bellowing “quiet”. Better is to train the dog to bark a few times, then “quiet”, and teach a good solid SIT. Create distance and calmness rather than reacting with the same energy that the dog is displaying.

Different triggers affect dogs in different ways. General examples of behavior correspond to categories that may progress from calm to aggressive. These observable behaviors may include one or more clusters of behaviors such as this:

Low end of spectrum Calm, undisturbed dog	Approaching trigger Threshold – tense, alert dog	Crossing trigger threshold Level 1 – reactive dog	Cross trigger threshold Level 2 – aggressive dog
Relaxed dog posture	Focused intense staring	Explosive barking/yipping	Snarling
Soft mouth	Ears forward	Repetitive, jumping, whining	Biting
Relaxed ears	Mouth closed	Lunging / Charging	Attacking
Responsive to owner/handler	Alert/stiffened body posture	Snapping / Growling	Unresponsive to owner/handler
I call these the la-di-dah dogs	Hackles/tail raised	May no longer be responsive to owner/handler w/o intense, focused redirection	Owner/handler must immediately create distance with this dog and seek professional modification help
	May be marginally responsible to owner/handler		

REACTIVITY ISN'T AGGRESSION – BUT – CAN TURN INTO AGGRESSION

Embrace this with caution and calmness. This does not mean every time your dog barks or lunges – for example – on a walk – that they are going to do this all the time. What we do matters. Like us, dogs change and evolve throughout their lives. Reactivity oftentimes starts out as misunderstanding signals (us and our dogs) and some form of frustration. Dogs may react if they aren't walked often or introduced to unfamiliar situations and environments. A stimulus (cat, person with a hat, another dog or wild animal may create a strong urge (drive) to meet, play, or, it can escalate into chase, catch and ... well ... let's hope it doesn't go that far. We are our dog's ambassadors (parents). We can't assume our dog (a predator) will not want to catch and mutilate another being. We hope not, but, there is that potential. What we can do is train, supervise, and practice safety and management with dogs.

Like us, dogs experience adrenaline surges. Being mugged, we would make a choice, on the spot, to fight or flight (get the heck away if we could). Dogs do the same when their perception is that of excitement or fear. A calm walk can intensify into a leash-pulling, face in the dirt experience that we would rather forget.

Have you ever been in the middle of a good movie and a noise outside creates sound effects not in the movie? A dog can and should be allowed to alert us to possible invaders, but, only until we say, "Thank you, I've got this, now quiet and lie down."

What I focus on with our, and client's dogs, is learning how to avoid teaching negative associations that may eventually cause a reactive dog to become aggressive. Maintaining our calm is not always easy, but it is important to remain level-headed. Honestly recognizing reactive tendencies, making a note, and gradually working on teaching/redirecting your dog to better behavior like a turning around, WATCH-ME and SIT, can prevent reactivity turning into an aggressive incident.

Please do not assume a dog will simply grow out of reactivity. For the relationship, if it completely worth changing behaviors that concern you and freak out your dog. For your and your dog's well-being, learn and apply positive, appropriate behavior modification techniques to help avoid the possibility of escalation. Getting to the root of the reactivity, prevention and management, and modification training will help.

The following is a brief list of ways to help prevent reactivity from turning into aggression. Breathing in deeply nose-to-navel – enjoy the journey because our lives with dogs enriches ours. Mistakes happen to teach us how to be better humans and dog parents.

WAYS TO PREVENT REACTIVITY FROM TURNING TO AGGRESSION DINO-DOG to RELAXO DOG NEEDS SOCIALIZATION AND TEAMWORK

1. DO NOT GET HUNG UP ON LABELS

When it comes to reactivity, labels can either simplify or complicate what can be a myriad of complex behavior patterns. Each dog learns, evolves and responds uniquely. Remember that dogs who live with us, from an early age, pick up on our emotions, responses and reactions to their behaviors too. What we do matters.

2. RECOGNIZE AGGRESSIVE

If your dog routinely growls, lunges and tries to bite others, be realistic, seek help. Dr. Ian Dunbar has an informative Bite Level Assessment Chart that every Veterinarian, Behavior and Trainer should have in their toolbox. Educational enrichment is essential for new puppy, or adoptive dog, parents. Make a choice to become informed. Make a change in how you interact with your dog. The root cause may be genetic, but most often it is triggered by the environment and a need for socialization and training. See your Veterinarian to rule out health and neurological issues that may need a team approach using medication and behavior modification.

3. SEEK HELP FROM AN APPROPRIATE TRAINER

It is worth getting an accredited, experienced trainer to listen, assess and help create a lifestyle and modification plan to help you and your dog. Look for a CPDT-KA (Certification of Professional Dog Trainers) or accredited behavior coach such IAABC (International Association of Behavior Consultants). This person is certified and possesses a range of skilled awareness in animal psychology, learning theory and dog training methodology.

4. HONESTLY ALERT OTHERS TO YOUR DOG'S REACTIVITY

Let people know that your dog needs some space and is training. You can embroider or Velcro "in training" on a vest or coat. Simply ask neighbors to give you and your dog supportive leeway. Will everyone listen? No, but we are our dog's best advocate. As their support system, we need to prevent reactive behaviors from being reinforced. Create space, redirect to a calmer place and posture (SIT, WATCH-ME) works.

5. BE KIND, BELIEVE IN YOUR DOG AND BE YOUR DOG'S BEST FRIEND

Many excitable, reactive dogs may benefit from focused driven, non-competitive energy balancing using games, walks in calmer environments, and targeted training, like focusing on you NO MATTER WHAT. The reward may be interacting with that other "safe dog" they once lunged and barked at. You can find a calmer dog team to interact with, making life more joyful and peaceful for you and your best friend.