

## On-Leash Reactivity to Other Dogs

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**O**n-leash reactivity to other dogs is a common problem, creating embarrassment and anxiety for people and dogs alike. There are many reasons that dogs bark, growl and lunge at other dogs. Some of the most common reasons are fear of interaction due to lack of socialization or traumatic experience at a young age, protection or possessiveness of the owner, territorial behavior when on or near the dog's perceived "property," object guarding (when toys or other valuable objects are involved), inappropriate greeting behavior on leash and much more. Many times a dog is simply overwhelmed with excitement, but no matter what the cause, in most cases the behavior can be successfully turned around. However, each situation is unique and requires the consultant to be well-versed with a variety of techniques and to be always aware of the importance of creating a safe and secure learning environment.

In this article we will be discussing treatment options for on-leash dogs who behave problematically when they see an unfamiliar dog. Usually, these behaviors include barking, lunging, or growling at other dogs and are called "reactive" in the dog training field. More subtle behaviors, such as stiffening, whining, or marking are often indications of discomfort and should be included in the "reactive" category by the discerning trainer. It is useful to keep in mind that as commonly used, "reactive" actually means any behavior that we humans find inappropriate! However, highly aroused barking and lunging are understandably the behaviors that can make life especially difficult for anyone who owns a "reactive" dog. Commonly, these behaviors are labeled "aggressive," but it is important to remember that "reactivity" and "aggression" are two very different things. Many dramatic behaviors, such as barking and lunging, can be signs of excitement and/or frustration and have no relationship to the potential of aggressive behavior. In contrast, a dog might be "aggressive" to others (meaning with the intent to harm) and yet show few signs of arousal when he sees another dog. Thus, "reactive" and "aggressive" maybe correlated, but they are not the same thing.

However, highly aroused dogs that are barking and lunging are at greater risk of being involved in an incident that ends up causing injury, just as fans at a football game can go relatively easily from yelling for their team to fighting the opponent's fans. For that reason, knowing how to work with reactive dogs, no matter what their original motivation, is often a key component in preventing and eventually treating dog-dog aggression.

### Background Required

To treat on-leash dog-dog reactivity, trainers need to know how to obtain a detailed history, which should include past experiences, present living conditions, the temperament and personality of the dog and the expectations of the

owner. Understanding the underlying motivations, triggers and goals is critical to achieving success or dealing with cases in which management is the only option. The ability to "read" dogs is a non-negotiable requirement: if the trainers are not able to "translate" subtle changes in facial expression and body posture, they are not going to be successful. Trainers must also have experience working with a variety of owners and be as good at understanding their needs and learning styles as they are the dogs'. In addition, a full tool box is essential: being an expert in one method without the ability to use other techniques restricts a trainer's repertoire and will make him or her less effective. And finally and most critically, a trainer must be absolutely aware of the importance of keeping all the actors safe from trauma or injury and be well-versed in creating fail-safe situations in which there is simply no possibility that a dog or person can be injured.

Although we cannot describe in detail the most common and successful methods of dealing with on-leash reactivity, we will summarize them in this article.

### Importance of "Threshold"

Critical to all of the methods is an understanding of the concept of threshold. Threshold is defined as "the point that must be exceeded to produce a given effect." We think of it as the intensity of the stimulus required to elicit the problem behavior. Every dog will have its own level of tolerance, which will vary depending upon the context. Proximity to another dog is a critical variable with most dogs, so it is essential to know at what distance the dog becomes reactive. However, there are many other factors in which threshold is important: Many dogs can handle a calm, quiet dog but become uncomfortable as soon as the other dog picks up speed. Most dogs are less reactive if they themselves are approaching the other dog, but become aroused when the dog walks directly toward them. Some dogs are not reactive when they see groups of dogs, but become so when they are one-on-one and, for others, it is just the opposite. Therefore, it is essential to recognize all of the triggers that affect each dog and the threshold of intensity that begins to elicit a response.

To determine a dog's threshold, a trainer must be adept at noting subtle signs of tension in a dog. Every dog is unique but, in general, trainers should be looking for changes in facial expressions (mouth closing from an open position, a slightly retracted commissure, offensive puckering, muscle tension, rounded eyes, a hard stare), as well as changes in posture and behavior (holding its breath, looking away, yawning, obsessively ignoring the other dog, sniffing the ground, changes in tail position, body shifted forward or backward). Some of these postures and expressions are appeasement signals, with a communicative function, and are used to defuse highly charged situations. They may consist of looking away, turning away, lying > down

or making small submissive movements away from the perceived threat. On the other hand, displacement behaviors, such as sniffing, scratching or shaking, are behaviors that are out of context to the situation. That is, when a dog is confused or undecided about how to act, he may engage in a behavior that is irrelevant to the situation.

In any case, trainers must be aware of subtle changes in a dog's demeanor that suggest he or she is becoming uncomfortable. Of course, not all dogs are equally expressive and, without heart rate variability tests and MRIs, we can't know with certainty what they are experiencing, but being able to "read" a dog is a critical aspect of all treatment methods. In the treatment methods discussed below, dogs should be worked below or at just the edge of threshold based on observations of the dog's expression and behavior.

### Using Operant Conditioning to Teach an Incompatible Behavior

One of the most important tools in a trainer's toolbox is operant conditioning (OC), in which the dog learns to offer a behavior in order to receive something he wants. There are lots of benefits to using OC with dogs who are reactive to others:

1) The successful use of OC does not always require that you know the dog's internal motivational state. Both dogs who are "on offense" or "on defense" can improve their behavior with these methods.

2) You can customize the behavior that works best for the dog, choosing a behavior that is incompatible with the action you are trying to replace and that is easy and enjoyable for the dog to do.

3) You can customize the reinforcement that most motivates the dog, whether it is great food, play with a favorite toy, and/or increasing or decreasing the distance between the dog and another dog.

4) OC often leads, indirectly, to classical counter conditioning, in which the dog not only changes his or her behavior when seeing another dog, but also changes the internal emotional state(s) that motivate the behavior.

Operant conditioning can be used to treat on-leash dog-dog reactivity in several ways. One frequently used method is to put a more appropriate behavior "on cue."

First, you can teach the dog to look at you as soon as he sees another dog. We begin with the cue "Watch" or the use of the dog's name, provided it has a good foundation and high history of success, or a nickname associated with lots of rewards. In this modality, the dog learns to turn away from an approaching dog and look toward his owner with (and this is key) the other dog itself acting as the cue.

The steps toward accomplishing this are:

- Teach your "look at me" cue in an area with no distractions, gradually working up to asking the dog to turn away from low-level distractions (not other dogs).
- Choose a reinforcer that is most motivating for the dog and creates a quick, yet positive, response. Food works well for many dogs, but for many dogs, play

is often a great choice for positive reinforcement. Tug or retrieving games, for example, for dogs who enjoy them, are not only reinforcing; they help dogs disperse tension. You can also reinforce the dog by increasing the distance between him and the other dog (if he is afraid of other dogs) or let the dog greet another (if he barks and lunges because he is frustrated).

- Next, ask the dog to look at you using your cue when he looks at a familiar dog with which he is comfortable. As always, set the dog up to win by initially giving the cue when the triggers are well under threshold, perhaps when the other dog is far away, or when the dogs are quiet and not likely to be easily distracted by one another.
- Once the dog will respond 90% of the time when mildly distracted, start asking him to look at you when he sees an unfamiliar dog as long as the dog is well beyond his "comfort zone." Don't wait until the other dog is too close: ask the dog-in-training to turn his head around when the other dog is a long way away. Have friends help you out so that you can control the distance between dogs. (It's fine if the dog in training looks at you and then turns his head right back to the other dog. That's great; it's another chance to get in another repetition! Just say your cue again and reinforce enthusiastically.)
- Pay careful attention, and look for the time that the dog anticipates your "look at me" cue and turns his head himself when he sees another dog. Jackpot! That's your goal—a dog who sees another and automatically turns to look at you. When that happens (often after a repetition of three to five spoken cues in the same session) give him an especially valuable reinforcer: ten treats, one at a time, or an especially great game of play or an animated run away from the other dog with lots of treats or play at the end to reinforce him for the desired behavior.

After enough repetitions, almost all dogs will automatically turn toward you when they see another dog, no longer barking, growling or stiffening up. Of course, threshold again comes into play: a dog may be capable of this "Auto Watch" when the other dog is ten yards away, but not yet when it is two feet away.

Another use of OC is to teach "Where's the Dog?" or "Look at That." This is a similar method as that above, but in this case you directly ask the dog to look at another dog, and immediately mark that behavior and reinforce it. In some ways the methods seem to be polar opposites: one asks the dog to turn away from another dog, and the other asks the dog to intentionally look toward another dog. Ironically, both methods lead to a similar pattern in which a dog looks at another dog and automatically ends up turning to look at you and getting reinforced for it.

The steps involved in teaching "Where's the Dog?" are relatively similar to those above, in that the dog is first taught the behavior when it is well under threshold. It works best if the trainer or friends can [continued on next page]

collaborate by bringing a non-reactive dog as a focus. Sometimes the dog needs to be asked to move around: asking the handler to walk the dog in a small circle provides enough movement to cause the dog in training to look without approaching too closely and eliciting a full response. Be very careful when you are using this technique since owners can inadvertently add the cue when the dog is in an agitated state. The cue can then become a predictor that a dog is coming and arousal can set in before the dog actually sees the other dog.

As soon as the dog's head turns toward the other dog, the behavior can be marked with a clicker or marker word and then immediately reinforced. Eventually, using standard OC principles, the behavior can be put on cue and the dog can be asked to look at another dog at increasing levels of difficulty.

Depending on the dog, you can use either method or both of them together. Patricia cured her Border Collie Willie of serious dog-dog aggression by first teaching a "Watch" cue and then adding "Where's the Dog" once he was able to look toward an unfamiliar dog without erupting into high-arousal barking.

### Operant Conditioning "Not on Cue"

Reactivity can also be countered by letting the dog learn that her own self-initiated behavior results in the reinforcement. The handler asks nothing of the dog, but teaches the dog that polite behavior will be reinforced, while impolite behavior is not. Here is a summary of the steps:

- The dog is introduced into a carefully managed situation in which she encounters an unfamiliar dog at the edge of her threshold, at a distance close enough to elicit the beginnings of the problematic response, but far away enough to keep the dog from becoming overly aroused.
- The handler stays still, watching intently for an improvement in behavior. As soon as the dog changes its behavior, expression or posture in ways that suggest it is becoming more relaxed (the changes, of course, depend on the individual dog), the dog is reinforced. In what is often called CAT (Constructional Aggression Treatment), the stimulus dog is removed, while in another method often referred to as BAT (Behavior Adjustment Training), the more appropriate behavior is marked with a clicker, and the subject dog is then allowed to move away from the stimulus dog as a reinforcement. In both cases the dogs learn that they can control their environment by their own behavior.
- Over time, the dog is brought closer and closer to the other, always learning that an appropriate, relaxed response is rewarded by withdrawal, (or approach, if that is what the subject dog is motivated to do) while inappropriate behavior keeps the dog in the same context.

The value of this approach is that the dog learns to manage his or her own behavior and learns that she can

control her environment through her own actions. The disadvantage is that the process can be time consuming and relies on a handler who is especially skilled at reading subtle signs of discomfort or relaxation in a dog.

### Classical Conditioning

All three of the methods above have the advantage of indirectly classically conditioning a dog to feel good at the approach of another dog. In every case the dog learns, not necessarily consciously, to associate feeling relaxed and happy when he sees another dog.

However, the direct use of classical counter conditioning (CCC) and desensitization is also a valuable tool. When using classical counter conditioning, you are attempting to change the emotional state of the dog. While we really don't know a dog's emotional state without using a heart rate monitor, we can often make good guesses by reading its body language. Thus, as with the techniques described above, trainers need to be adept at reading subtle changes in expression and behavior.

Also as above, classical counter conditioning requires trainers to do their homework before starting. You first need to find out in what contexts the dog can comfortably function (i.e., distance from the neutral dog, type of neutral dog, behavior of neutral dog, and much more). Once the dog's threshold is established, the trainer or owner begins to feed the dog or play with the dog upon the sight of the other. In essence, the subject dog learns that the presence of a neutral dog brings about something good, like chicken or steak or his favorite tug game. By staying below threshold, the dog remains calm and learns to associate other dogs with feeling relaxed and happy.

As the dog is becoming more and more comfortable, it should be moved closer and closer to the neutral dog, stopping well before threshold. Short, brief sessions are best. Once the dog is in a calmer state and can focus on the owner without being reactive, it is often easier to teach the suggested operant conditioning behaviors mentioned above, since the dog has better focus and attention. However, you can be a great trainer and start off using OC without first changing the dog's emotion.

These descriptions make it clear that OC and CCC are not always distinct categories—they overlap to some extent, and how you best employ them depends on the dog, the context of treatment and the owner's capabilities. Our recommendation for those interested in learning more is to work with an experienced trainer or behaviorist to learn which methods work best for you, for the owners, and for each the individual dog.

### Safety First

In all cases, special attention must be made to keeping the exercises safe for people and dogs. Trainers must create an environment of complete safety, in which the problem dog is unable, no matter what happens, to harm the "stimulus dog" or his owner. Depending on the severity of the problem, trainers need to be adept at using body harnesses, head collars and muzzles, as well as managing >

the situation to ensure that no harm is done. It is also critical to remember that emotional harm can be as serious as physical injury, and no dog should be put in a situation of being frightened or traumatized, even if the chance of physical injury is nil.

### Avoiding Aversives

All of the methods described above avoid the use of physical aversives as much as possible. Responses that include positive punishments such as yelling or jerking the leash can often exacerbate the problem, by either confirming a dog's fears that other dogs are dangerous, or by increasing the chance of defensive aggression. We have found that in an overwhelming number of cases, it is far safer and more effective to use positive reinforcement to teach a dog what you want it to do, rather than correcting what you don't.

### Feisty Fido Classes

Not everyone can afford a one-on-one consultation and, in some cases, it is difficult to arrange other dogs to work with under controlled conditions. Basic group classes for dogs that are easily aroused when around other dogs can lead to frustration in the dog as well as the handler and those in the classroom. Therefore, finding a good reactive-dog class is beneficial since the space is typically larger with fewer dogs and more instructors. For more information, please see the January/February 2010 issue of *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog* written by Pia Silvani on this topic.

### Summary

Obviously this is an issue that is complex, and every case requires a thorough understanding of the dog, the owner and the environment. However, the methods we've outlined have helped thousands of dogs and should be in the tool box of every trainer who is interested in working with dog-dog "aggression" issues.

### Suggested Resources (in alphabetical order)

Donaldson, Jean. (2008). *Canine fear, aggression and play DVD*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

Donaldson, Jean. (2009). *Dogs are from Neptune, 2nd edition*. Dogwise Publishing.

Donaldson, Jean. (2004). *Fight! A practical guide to the treatment of dog-dog aggression*. Distributed by Dogwise Publishing.

Ganley, Dee. (2008). *Changing people, changing dogs—Positive solutions for difficult dogs*. Dee Ganley Training Services, Inc.

King, Trish. (2004). *Abandonment training DVD*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

King, Trish. (2004). *Dog meets dog seminar DVD*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

London, Karen. (2008). *Canine play, including its relationship to aggression DVD*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

McConnell, Patricia. (2003). *Dog-dog aggression seminar DVD*. McConnell Publishing Ltd.

McConnell, Patricia. (2004). *Reading between the lines seminar DVD*. McConnell Publishing Ltd.

McConnell, Patricia and London, Karen. (2009). *Feisty fido: Help for the leash reactive dog, 2nd edition*. Distributed by Dogwise Publishing.

McDevitt, Leslie (2007). *Control unleashed: Creating a focused and confident dog*. Clean Run Productions.

McDevitt, Leslie. (2009). *Control unleashed - A foundation seminar 4-DVD set*. Clean Run Productions LLC.

Overall, Karen. (1997). *Clinical behavioral medicine for small animals*. Mosby.

Reid, Pamela. (2007). *When good dogs go bad DVD*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

Sdao, Kathy. (2006). *Cujo meets Pavlov! Classical conditioning for on-leash aggression seminar DVD set*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

Silvani, Pia. *Feisty fidos training manual*. St Hubert's Animal Welfare Center.

Silvani, Pia. (2008). *Fighting dogs – Family and strangers DVD, 2nd edition*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

Silvani, Pia. (2009). *Silvani's chill out! Dealing with overly aroused dogs DVD*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

Silvani, Pia. (2009). *To be mod or not to be mod – That is the question DVD*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

Stewart, Grisha. (2010). *BAT behavior adjustment training DVD – Full day seminar*. Tawzer Dog Videos.

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