



## Canine Reactive Behavior

“Reactivity” characterizes a dog that is barking and/or lunging while on leash or behind a barrier in the presence of a specific trigger. It has several potential causes and can vary greatly in intensity.

**Barrier frustration** is intense frustration on the dog’s part at the inability to express normal canine body language and/or interact with other dogs/humans. Dogs are strongly motivated to greet one another and can become intensely frustrated if they are unable to do so. The restrictive barrier can be a leash, but can also be something like a window, fence, or gate. In essence, the dog’s frustration has amplified to a point where it is expressed vocally and physically.

Though barrier frustration can look vicious, for many dogs the “aggressive” behaviors disappear when meeting dogs/people in other contexts, i.e. without the frustration of the barrier. However, even if your dog *is* dog-friendly off leash, the built-up frustration can lead to tension or escalation if allowed to meet a dog during a reactive episode. Because of this, it is not recommended that you simply allow your dog to immediately meet other dogs on leash during a reactive moment.

Reactivity can also be **fear-based**. For these dogs, “the best defense is a good offense.” The dog sees something that makes them uncomfortable and responds by *proactively attempting to create distance* by barking/lunging. These dogs may not be thrilled to meet other dogs at all, regardless of the leash barrier. **Despite having different causes, the basic management strategies for frustration based- and fear-based reactivity are the same.**

### What You Can Do About It

- **LEARN YOUR DOG’S THRESHOLD.** How far away does your dog have to be from a trigger to remain **alert but calm**? 20ft? 50ft? Find out whatever their minimum distance is and try to maintain it on walks.
- **Identify when/where your dog is reactive, and what their triggers are.** Does your dog show reactive behaviors behind fences, on leash, out of windows? Is it towards small dogs, large dogs, men, women, people in hats, etc.?
- **Add “environmental management.”** Is your dog less likely to bark if something is blocking their view of a high traffic window? Can you give them enrichment items divert their focus during “high trigger” times in the home? Can you limit their yard access to when you’re able to supervise to avoid practicing barking? Think of ways you can change their environment to set them up for success.
- **Try walking at times when you know there will be less foot traffic.** Think about times and places where dogs are scarce, so that they are less likely to encounter their triggers in the first place. Look for large open areas where you can see other dogs coming at a distance, and move away easily if needed.
- **Maintain situational awareness while on walks.** If you do see a trigger, be prepared to find a route to make some distance between the two dogs; make a 180 turn if they are coming towards you, cross the street, move behind a car, etc.
- **Stay calm.** Use a happy tone when you see your dog’s trigger—stay calm, but aware. Keep the leash loose if possible. If you seem tense or uneasy and preemptively tighten the leash, your dog can pick up on that and may assume you are as uneasy about the trigger as they are--a signal that they should react.
- **Try training together!** All of the above tips are *management strategies*. If you want to *change* your dog’s behavior, there are many specific training plans for dogs experiencing reactivity. **East Bay SPCA offers a reactivity class called Calm, Cool and Collected!** Hiring a private trainer is also a good option. For a beginning exercise, check out the “LAT: A Training Tool for Reactive Behavior” and “Emergency U-Turns” handouts on our website in the “Behavior Resources” section.
- **Make sure any trainer or method you choose uses positive reinforcement training methods.** Using aversive methods to modify reactivity can lead to serious behavior fallout including increased aggression. See the link below for help on how to choose a trainer:  
<https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/general-pet-care/behavioral-help-your-pet>

For more information and behavioral support, contact our behavior department at [www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp](http://www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp)