



## Canine Reactive Behavior

"Reactive behaviors" are characterized by barking and/or lunging in the presence of a specific trigger. These might be other dogs, unknown humans, bikes, skateboards, etc. They have two main causes, and vary greatly in intensity.

### Frustration-Based Reactive Behaviors

Dog-social dogs are *strongly motivated to greet one another and can become intensely frustrated if they are unable to do so*. If they are prevented from doing so (ex. By a leash, fence, or window), they can have an intense frustrated response, which often includes barking and even "aggressive" looking behaviors. In essence, the dog's frustration has amplified to a point where it is expressed vocally and physically.

### Fear-Based Reactive Behaviors

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.*

### An Extra Factor: Barriers

Many dogs will bark/lunge at triggers *more often* from behind a barrier. The restrictive barrier can be a leash, but can also be something like a window, fence, or gate. Though barrier frustration can look aggressive (growling/snapping/showing teeth), for some dogs those 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*.



## 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 not barking?* 20ft? 50ft? Find out whatever their minimum distance is and try to maintain it on walks. “Below threshold” is where all training for reactive behaviors can occur. You can change this distance with training, but learning your dog’s threshold is your first step!
- **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 like 8am and 5pm, when everyone walks their dogs? 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.** Try to keep a calm, relaxed demeanor when you see your dog’s trigger—stay calm, but aware. If trying to call them to you, use a happy or excited voice. Keep the leash loose if possible. If you preemptively tighten the leash or attempt to yank the dog away, you can unintentionally add stress or intensity to the situation—and potentially make a reaction more likely.
- **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, as well as private training sessions. For some beginning exercises, check out the *LAT: A Training Tool for Reactive Behavior* and *Emergency U-Turns* handouts on our website.
- **Try our Reactivity Basics online module.** Training reactive behaviors accounts for over 75% of the private training cases our behavior team works with every year! *Because of the high demand, we've created an online module* which can offer you some initial strategies to get started even before you approach a trainer. You can access the module through our website, or through this [link](#).