

Walking Your Reactive Dog

Reactive dogs are often described as dogs that bark, pull, or lunge towards people or animals. It is not uncommon for friendly dogs to become more reactive only while on leash. Some dogs that start out as reactive on leash can actually become aggressive towards people or animals they meet while on leash. For this reason, it is important for the safety of you, your dog, and your community that you take every effort to manage your dog's on leash reactivity and find ways to reduce the behavior.

Leash Control

The first step to walking a reactive dog is having control of the dog through leash control. If your dog is walking on a leash longer than 1-2 feet and the dog is at the end of the leash, you have very little control over what he has access to. The longer the leash, the more the dog is able to get out ahead of you. When the dog gets ahead of you they are more likely to see things that you haven't seen yet and are less responsive to you.

Equipment

When dogs pull on their leash, collar, or harness they can cause physical damage to themselves and you. The type of equipment that you use can assist in retraining your dog to walk nicely on a leash. All training equipment will require some training using positive reinforcement for the dog to understand what the new behavior is that you want. Whichever kind of leash, collar, or harness that you choose to use will only be used to facilitate further training and should never be considered as a tool to "fix" any behavior issue.

- Front Clip Harness – Harness that clips the leash to the chest area rather than the back or shoulders. Provides an opportunity to reinforce redirecting attention to the handler. Reduces pulling over time if used correctly. Some examples include Easy Walk Harness, Freedom Harness, Sense-able Harness, and No Pull Harness.
- Head Halter – used in a similar manner as with horse – control the head, control the rest of the animal. Many dogs will need to be trained to accept equipment that they wear on their face so this is not recommended for dogs and owners looking for a short term solution. Head halters are not muzzles as they provide no control on the dog's ability to bite or use their mouth. Dogs should be able to eat, drink, play, bite, and chew normally while wearing a head halter. Some examples include Gentle Leader, Walk N' Train Head Halter, Sporn Head Control Halter, and Holt Walking Collar
- Leashes – There are a few leashes that can be used to reduce pulling but they typically apply pressure and will reduce pulling through positive punishment and negative reinforcement (applying pressure when the dog pulls and removing pressure when the dog does not pull). Some examples include Weiss Walkie, Thunder Leash, and Instant Trainer Leash.

Other equipment that is not recommended for reactive dogs includes prong or pinch collars, choke chains, shock or static electronic collars, and extendable or flexi-leashes. These types of equipment cause pain and reduce the animal's ability to learn what they should do rather than what they should not do. Although extendable leashes, or flexi-leads, do not cause any harm to the animal, they reduce the handler's ability to control the dog and are not recommended for dogs with behavior issues.

Redirection

Patricia McConnell's "[How to Handle Reactive Dogs](#)"

Victoria Stillwell writes about a technique that she uses for reactive dogs on her website www.positively.com in the article "[The Value of Redirection.](#)"

She says "One of my favorite games that I play with lead reactive dogs is the 'go find it' game." She continues, "This is done by throwing bits of food onto the ground one after the other and encouraging the dog to 'go find'."

She also goes on to say that "Redirection helps dogs make better choices." And "Repetition builds a habit of behavior so that the dog now behaves differently in the presence of a stimulus that previously resulted in a negative response and naturally moves into the redirected action cue or behavior without being promoted."