



Dog Behaviour Guide

Leash Reactivity



When on-leash, does your dog bark, growl, lunge, or pull towards other dogs, people, or objects, such as bicycles? If so, your dog may be leash reactive. The leash restricts our dog's movement, which can cause frustration. Here are some recommendations for addressing leash reactivity.

Avoidance

Your dog's leash reactivity may be a result of your dog attempting to increase their distance away from something they perceive to be fearful. Their behaviour, such as growling, barking, or lunging, may be your dog's way of communicating their discomfort.

Excitability

Your dog's leash reactivity may be related to the leash restricting them from approaching something excitable. Triggers will differ for each dog, but a common example is a fast-moving object, such as a bicycle. In other cases, some dogs may experience excitability when they see a small animal, such as a squirrel or rabbit.

Note: a "trigger" is anything that causes a dog's level of arousal, fear, or reactivity to increase, which can be positive or negative.

Pay Attention to Warning Signs

Pay attention to your dog's body language. If your dog begins to show subtle signs of discomfort, such as turning their head or body away, flattened ears, or paw lifting, you should start to intervene. If your dog's leash reactivity is due to excitability, watch for signs of arousal such as the tail and ears up, hackles raised, and/or whining. Observing for subtle signs of fear or excitability allows you to intervene before your dog becomes unmanageable.

How to Address Leash Reactivity

- Use high-value treats to re-direct your dog's attention to you. When you start to observe subtle signs of stress or excitement, ask your dog to perform a command, such as "sit." This helps direct your dog's attention away from the fearful or excitable trigger. Continue to engage your dog until the trigger has moved away and/or your dog begins to relax.
- Leave the situation. Try walking or jogging in the opposite direction of the trigger. If your dog does not follow you, try using a treat or toy to lure your dog towards you, and then start to move away from the trigger.

- Engage your dog on walks. Try cueing your dog periodically, such as “sit” or “heel” and reward your dog for the correct behaviour. This helps your dog focus on you, instead of potential triggers in their environment. Walking your dog in lower distraction environments, such as a quiet neighborhood, can also reduce the number of triggers you encounter.
- Manage your dog’s environment. If someone approaches you with another dog on-leash, politely ask the person to walk away. Preventing a negative encounter is important to reduce leash-reactivity and ensure the safety of both dogs and handlers.

What to AVOID

Here are some things to avoid when addressing leash reactivity:

- Punishing your dog. This can perpetuate your dog’s stress or arousal. Punishing warning signs may also prevent your dog from giving subtle stress signs in the future. Next time, instead of barking or growling, your dog may bite without warning. Punishing a fearful or highly aroused dog can cause your dog to redirect aggression towards you.
- Aversive equipment, such as prong or choke collars. This type of equipment uses pain to control a dog’s movement. This can cause your dog to associate the trigger with pain, which can increase their arousal or fear towards the trigger in the future.

Additional Resources:

The Training Academy at the Edmonton Humane Society offers Leash Reactivity 101! This course helps you build your dog’s confidence and/or self-control around other dogs while on a leash. For more information, visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/sessions/leash-reactivity-101/>

We also offer private consultations with our trainers, which may be more appropriate for some dogs. For further information, visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/what-we-do/education-training/dog-training/private-consultations/>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:
askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).