



## ASK THE TRAINER

### Leash Reactivity

Barking, growling, lunging, and other aggressive-looking displays have roots in emotions of ambivalence, fearfulness, frustration, and/or arousal. A focus on simply stopping the behaviour – for example, via use of a prong collar – may cause temporary suppression of the unwanted behaviour; however, more often than not, the unwanted behaviours will return in a more potent and resilient form. The best approach seeks to change the driving force – the emotion – behind the behaviour and will avoid the fallout of coercive and forceful techniques, which frequently include damage to the owner-dog relationship, disruption of behaviours other than the targeted behaviour, new problematic behaviours, increased aggression and/or fearfulness, physical injury to the dog, and feelings of guilt on the part of the owner.

Management means preventing the unwanted behaviour by controlling the dog's environment. Behaviours that are rehearsed are far more likely to be repeated. This is a matter of how our brains etch neuropathways during the learning process (see this article from McGill University for details: [http://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/d/d\\_07/d\\_07\\_cl/d\\_07\\_cl\\_tra/d\\_07\\_cl\\_tra.html](http://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/d/d_07/d_07_cl/d_07_cl_tra/d_07_cl_tra.html)).

The first step in successful training is successful management.

What management means for your dog depends very much on what triggers your dog's reactive behaviour and the intensity of your dog's reaction. Be vigilant about your surroundings

and where potential “escape routes” are located (be it behind a car, across the street, up a driveway), as well as anything that may trigger your dog to react. Hazards can include dogs that are off-leash or on flexi-leashes, bicycles, dogs behind fences, men with beards, running children – anything to which your dog may react. Plan your walking route through an area that allows you to freely move away from your dog's triggers. Be prepared to temporarily reroute your walk if necessary.

Through management, you are looking not only to prevent the behavioural reaction but the emotional reaction as well. This gives you a “window” in which you can effectively and successfully undertake behaviour-modification training. View each approaching trigger as a training opportunity, and situate yourself in a location far enough away, where you predict that your dog will remain under-threshold (i.e., not barking/lunging at the trigger).

The basis of the training is Classical Conditioning – learning through association rather than consequence. (Remember Pavlov's dogs from psychology class?) This means that your dog-reactive dog, let's call her “Elsie,” is not being rewarded for staying quiet but instead is getting a tasty treat simply because there is a dog nearby. Good management means that you will prevent Elsie from getting too close to the other dog. From this distance she can look at the dog without reacting. You can then take this opportunity to pair the sight of the dog with really tasty treats. In time, and with consistency, Elsie will learn that the sight of another dog predicts that really good things will happen. Good management means that Elsie will never feel “in over her head,” and eliminating all corrective techniques from your training repertoire means that she will not come to associate dogs with unpleasant things.

Use the most exciting treats possible for this training – no vegetables or crunchy biscuits! The major aspect of this training is to “infuse” the sighting of the trigger with the emotional response to the treat. A dog's emotional response to tripe, sardines, and steak is very different to its response to a Milk-Bone or a carrot (given the choice, which does your dog prefer?). For each walk/training session, bring two to three types of really good treats and carry them in an easily accessible fanny pack or treat pouch.

Behaviour modification for reactive dogs takes a lot of time, commitment, and a willingness to learn the techniques of science-based and force-free dog training. There is no “quick fix” for this problem, and techniques that seem to provide this come laden with initially unapparent – though very real – dangers. For further guidance and to learn about other dog-friendly behaviour modification techniques for your reactive dog, seek help from a professional who has comprehensive knowledge of this methodology.

### Resources:

Myths about Dog Aggression

<http://blogs.dogster.com/dog-training/myths-about-dog-aggression-part-i/2011/01/>

“Feisty Fido: Help for the Leash

Reactive Dog” by Patricia McConnell

<http://www.dogwise.com/itemdetails.cfm?ID=DTB766EBK>

“Treats for Growls?! Changing an

Aggressive Dog's Mind” by Jess Rollins

[http://www.petexpertise.com/dog-training-and-emotional-behavior.html?utm\\_source=streamsend&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=12221201&utm\\_campaign=%20Treats%20for%20Growls%3F%20+%20Antlers%20on%20Sale!%20-%20New%20Dog%20Articles%20from%20Pet%20Expertise](http://www.petexpertise.com/dog-training-and-emotional-behavior.html?utm_source=streamsend&utm_medium=email&utm_content=12221201&utm_campaign=%20Treats%20for%20Growls%3F%20+%20Antlers%20on%20Sale!%20-%20New%20Dog%20Articles%20from%20Pet%20Expertise)

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