



Top 10 Tips for Helping Your Reactive Dog

Positive Reinforcement Training Guide for Dogs Reactive Toward Other Dogs

By Double D Dog Training – Dog Training Fun For The Whole Family!

1. Understand What Reactivity Is

Reactivity often looks like barking, lunging, or growling when another dog is nearby. It doesn't mean your dog is aggressive—it usually signals fear, frustration, or excitement. When you see these behaviors, remember that your dog is trying to cope with a situation that feels stressful. By shifting your mindset, you can stay calmer and respond with training rather than punishment.

2. Set Your Dog Up for Success

The best training starts with prevention. If you know your dog reacts strongly at 10 feet from another dog, keep them at 20 feet or more. Crossing the street, turning around, or even using parked cars as visual barriers can help. The fewer times your dog has big outbursts, the more quickly they'll learn calm behavior pays off.

3. Use High-Value Rewards

Standard kibble won't cut it here. Save the tastiest treats—chicken, cheese, hot dog slices, or freeze-dried liver—for training around triggers. Think of it as payment for hard work. If your dog is willing to look at you instead of barking at another dog, that deserves a paycheck they're excited about.

4. Practice “Look at That”

This game, developed by trainer Leslie McDevitt, helps reframe how your dog views other dogs. When your dog notices a dog, mark it (say “Yes!”) and immediately reward. Over time, your dog learns that calmly looking at another dog makes treats appear. This shifts their feelings from “Uh-oh!” to “Oh good, treats are coming!”

5. Work Below Threshold

Training only works if your dog is calm enough to learn. If they're barking, lunging, or can't eat treats, they're "over threshold." Instead, train at a distance where they can notice the other dog but remain relaxed. Slowly close the distance in baby steps as your dog shows success. Patience at this stage builds strong foundations.

6. Teach an Emergency U-Turn

Sometimes you'll be surprised by a dog coming around a corner. Having a pre-trained U-turn cue lets you cheerfully move away before your dog reacts. Practice it first in calm environments—say "This way!" in a happy voice, turn together, and reward with treats. Then use it in real-world walks as a quick escape tool.

7. Reward Alternative Behaviors

Instead of focusing on "Don't bark," teach your dog what to do instead. Reward them for checking in with you, sitting calmly, or even sniffing the ground. Sniffing is self-soothing and a natural dog stress reliever. If you consistently pay your dog for calm behaviors, they'll start offering them automatically.

8. Build Focus and Engagement

Make yourself the most fun thing on the walk. Play games like hand targeting, "Watch Me" (eye contact on cue), or simple tricks like spin/touch. If your dog learns that looking at you always pays off, it becomes easier for them to ignore distractions. Strong engagement is your secret weapon in reactivity training.

9. Keep Walks Calm and Short

Reactivity training is mentally exhausting for dogs. Aim for quality, not quantity—15 minutes of calm walking with positive experiences is far better than 45 minutes filled with blowups. Walk in quiet neighborhoods, at off-peak times, or explore new routes with fewer dogs. Short, positive outings build your dog's confidence over time.

10. Be Patient & Celebrate Progress

Think in terms of small wins: your dog looked at another dog quietly for 2 seconds? Celebrate! They stayed under threshold when passing across the street? Celebrate! These little steps add up to big changes. Progress is not always linear, so expect setbacks. With patience, consistency, and kindness, your dog will grow more confident and calm.

✓Key Reminders

- Never punish your dog for reacting—it increases fear and can make reactivity worse.

- Manage the environment as much as possible.
- Practice short, frequent sessions instead of long, stressful ones.
- Celebrate small wins—they add up!

Progress is measured in months, not days. With consistency, you'll see gradual improvement—and every step forward makes your walks more enjoyable.

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