

In-House Behavior Modification Protocol On Leash Reactivity to Other Dogs

Protocol to be used on shelter dogs who exhibit reactivity (barking, growling, lunging) towards other dogs when being walked on a leash.

1. The reactive dog should be properly fit with and desensitized to wearing a gentle leader head collar before any work can be done to modify the behavior.
2. Take the reactive dog for a walk using the gentle leader and a regular leash (not a retractable). Have plenty of special treats in pocket or treat pouch.
3. Do not let the reactive dog get too close to other dogs. We want to start 'below threshold' (the point where he/she starts to react to the sight of other dogs) so we use distance.
4. AS SOON as the reactive dog sees another dog at a distance – start to deliver the treats as long as he/she is NOT reacting.

*If he/she doesn't take the treats – you are either too close to the other dog or you need better treats.

The idea is for the reactive dog to learn (over time) that the sight of another dog PREDICTS treats. This will help to change his/her emotional response to other dogs from negative to positive.

5. If/when the reactive dog starts to react to the sight of another dog – gently pull up on the leash so that the two loops of the gentle leader tighten. This is NOT a correction – you should not jerk the leash. We are simply trying to humanely suppress the negative reaction so that it is no longer reinforcing to the dog.

Hold up on the leash with gentle pressure until the dog stops reacting (do not say a word). AS SOON as the dog stops reacting - release the tension and start deliver the treats again.

Do this EVERY time the dog reacts to another dog.

Over time the dog will learn that the negative behaviors of lunging, barking, growling, etc. are not worth doing (because you stop them immediately) and that staying calm in the presence of another dog is more rewarding.

You must do this over and over – slowly moving the reactive dog closer to other dogs as his/her behavior improves. This process will take a while (weeks) so be patient.

It is important to understand that every time the dog is “allowed” to “practice” its negative reaction, the behavior gets stronger and is much more difficult to modify. It is very important that the dog is worked every time he/she is exposed to other dogs. If only one out of five people who walk the dog does the counterconditioning exercise, the dog's behavior will not improve.