

In-House Behavior Modification Protocol On Leash Reactivity to People

Protocol to be used for shelter dogs that exhibit negative behaviors (barking, growling, lunging, snapping) towards people when being walked on a leash. This behavior usually stems from a lack of socialization to people or past bad experienced with people, or both. Someone who has bonded with the dog should perform this work.

1. The dog should be properly fit with and desensitized to wearing a gentle leader head collar.
2. The dog should be clicker charged (know that the sound of the clicker predicts a treat) and know that he/she can make the click happen by performing a behavior.
3. Take the dog for a walk using the gentle leader and a regular leash (not a retractable). Have your clicker and plenty of high value treats in pocket or treat pouch.
4. Do not let the dog get too close to people. We want to start 'below threshold' (the point where he/she starts to react negatively to the sight of people), so we use distance.
5. AS SOON as the dog looks at a person at a distance – start to mark (using the clicker) any non-reactive behavior followed by the delivery of the treats.

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

The idea is for the dog to learn (over time) that looking at a person at a distance PREDICTS treats. This will help to change his/her emotional response to people from negative to positive.

6. If the dog starts to react negatively to the sight of a person – gently pull the gentle leader to turn the dog's head away from the person and move the dog farther away. If the dog cannot calm down even at an increased distance from the person, lift 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 to help the dog calm down.

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 clicking and treating non-reactivity again as long as the person is still in view.

You must conduct many sessions over time – slowly moving the dog closer to people as his/her behavior improves. This process will take a while (weeks) so be patient. At some point you can start to have the people toss the treats to the dog, again from a distance to start.

It is very important that the dog is worked every time he/she is exposed to people. If only one out of five people who walk the dog does the counterconditioning exercise, the dog's behavior will not improve.