

Living With The Reactive Dog



We all know someone with this kind of dog--the dog who barks at everything, jumps on visitors, is constantly on the move, never seems calm and is always on high alert. A dog with this temperament will often end up in a shelter or rescue situation. He is surrendered because of neighbor complaints, or he is destructive in the house or starts to become aggressive toward people or other dogs. Once in a shelter situation and without proper handling, the reactivity can become more serious.

It is important that these dogs are moved out of a shelter as soon as possible and into a home situation with owners who understand how to help and handle such dogs.

In general, these dogs are born with a genetic predisposition to this type of behavior. High reactivity will be seen commonly in certain breeds or mixes. Terriers, herding breeds and some of the toy breeds often show these characteristics and owners will describe them as “hyper” or “high strung” or “nervous”. However, individuals with high reactivity can and do occur in all breeds.

All of these dogs have certain things in common: ***no frustration tolerance, high energy and high anxiety***. It is important to address all of these things to get the reactive dog under control.

Physical management/control is very important in living with reactive dogs. Reactivity cannot be “trained” out of these dogs. It is part of who they are! Training will not turn a high energy Jack Russell Terrier into a sleepy Bassett Hound but good management, coupled with proper training, can make living with the high energy dog fun and rewarding.

Crucial when working with these dogs is putting them on a predictable schedule. Potty breaks, feeding, exercise, quiet time and play time should be as close to the same times each day as possible. These dogs, more than most, are especially sensitive to change and need to have an idea of what to expect and when. A reliable routine is very important to relieving stress and to help insure a good outcome.

Equipment

Before starting any kind of training, it is important to have good tools to enable physical control of the reactive dog. Without good management/control, all the training in the world won't help. When first starting to work with a reactive dog, a visit to the Vet may be useful. If the dog is extremely anxious, medication is available that can help to relieve some of the stress and help the dog to focus.

- 1) A head halter--most dogs accept the type with the cheek piece (like a horse halter) better than the one that consists of two loops. The head halter is invaluable in walking the reactive dog in public. It gives the owner complete control, no matter how powerful the dog and it allows control of the dog's head and mouth.



- 2) A drag line--this can be made of any lightweight but strong cord or a nylon leash with the loop cut off. Two lines will be needed--one for the house and a longer one to wear outside if the dog will be loose in a fenced yard. These should not have a loop in the end and should be attached to the dog's collar at all times unless he is on a leash. The house line should be about 3-4 ft long (depending on the size of the dog) and the outside line can be as long as is necessary. Often field dog trainers use a line like this when training outdoors--known as a check line or check cord, they can be up to 30 ft long. These can be purchased at pet supply stores. These lines will give the owner control over the dog's movements when he/she is not on leash. The reactive dog should never be chased or yelled at and should never be given a command unless the owner can make sure the dog obeys. Using the drag line allows the owner to control the dog's movements calmly and quickly and enforce any commands.



- 3) Lots of chew toys--ones that the dog really wants to chew on! Chewing is a great stress reliever but it has to be something that the dog really can go to work on and will last more than a few minutes. This will be a challenge. I do not recommend beefhide products because they often cause digestive upset. Porkhide is better but it should be something much more substantial than pigs ears! I also do not recommend cooked bones (often sold in pet stores filled with cheese or peanut butter) which can be shattered and swallowed by a determined chewer. Raw marrow bones cut **3-4 inches long** can be used IF the dog is supervised while chewing. The raw bone has some flexibility and won't shatter like a cooked bone but it does come filled with marrow which is very rich and could cause digestive upset. If necessary, the marrow can be partially scooped out before the bone is given to the dog.
- 4) A proper sized crate in a quiet spot. The crate can be either wire or plastic but should not be too large. The dog should be able to stand, turn around and lay down but that's about all. The crate should be located in a quiet place but not isolated from the rest of the family. The owner's bedroom often works well and the reactive dog will benefit from being close to the owners at night. Sleeping in the same room helps with the bonding process.

Basic Training for The Reactive Dog

- 1) Doing Nothing/Settle! This is a foundation exercise for any dog but especially for the always busy, reactive dog. This exercise will teach the dog frustration tolerance and how to relax and just hang out with the owner.
- With the dog on a leash or the house line, find a comfortable spot to sit and find something to do--work on the computer, watch TV etc.
 - Secure the leash by sitting on it or wrapping it around your chair or whatever will allow the dog to be able to sit, stand or lay down at your side but not move around too much.
 - The owner will sit in the chair with the dog secured and ignore the dog. The dog will typically try to leave, paw the owner's legs, whine, pant and be very agitated.
 - If the dog tries to jump up on legs or lap, use a body block to keep him down--it's important not to use hands to push him off--touch with hands is "praise"!

It is important that the owner stays relaxed and calm and the exercise does not end until the dog gives up and is sitting or laying quietly. The owner can use the command "settle" during this process but any talking should be kept to a minimum. The reward for settling down with the owner can be

brief, quiet stroking, verbal praise or simply allowing him to get up and leave. This should be done every day, gradually building up the time until the dog is laying quietly for an hour or more at a time.

- 2) Watch Me! These dogs are extremely distractable and this is a trait that *will not change* with training. What will change is the ability to direct the dog's attention back to the owner and the ability of the dog to focus on the owner and ignore distractions.
- a. Start with a lot of very tasty, very tiny treats (cut up chicken, hot dogs etc).
 - b. With the dog sitting or standing in front, say the word "watch" or "watch me", show the dog the treat and raise the treat to eye level.
 - c. As soon as the dog "tracks" the treat to the owner's eye level he gets the treat.
 - d. Don't expect any eye contact as yet (he will be watching your hand) and don't try to make him wait for the treat. He should be getting treats each time he raises his head to watch.
 - e. After repeating this exercise several times, let the dog become distracted. When he is looking at something else, give the command. If he turns to look for the treat, he has figured out the exercise.
 - f. Once he understands what is expected, increase the time he is expected to watch the treat between giving the command and giving the reward.
 - g. The next step will be transitioning from the dog watching the hand, to the dog making eye contact.

Eye contact with the owner is the ultimate goal of the exercise. Once the dog learns to make eye contact every time he is given the command to "watch", the owner can use the command whenever the dog needs to be redirected. A dog which is paying attention to his/her owner is not likely to get into trouble.



- 3) Kennel! This command is used when the dog is to go to his crate.
- a. With the crate door open, toss treats inside while saying "kennel!" in a happy excited voice. At first just have him go inside, get the treat and come right out.
 - b. Once he is going inside happily, shut the crate door for a few seconds before letting him out. Gradually increase the time the door is closed but make sure he is quiet and calm before letting him back out.
 - c. Once he is happy to go into the crate and will be spending longer amounts of time there, give him a really great chew toy to keep him occupied.

Use the crate when you will be gone, when he just needs a quiet time, at night or whenever it is difficult to keep the dog under control (lots of company, childrens' play dates, workman coming in and out, etc.). _



In addition to the exercises mentioned above, these dogs need to be taught basic obedience and will benefit from the structure of an obedience or manners class. A good obedience class will teach other important and useful commands such as "Wait", "Stay" and "Come". These classes also provide great places to practice the "doing nothing" and "watch" exercises because there is so much distraction. The reward for owners: reactive dogs tend to be very intelligent and quick learners. They are eager, attentive, affectionate and always up for new adventure. All an owner needs is dedication, a willing spirit, a sense of humor and the ability to stay one step ahead!

More Tips For Reactive Dogs

Exercise--walking or jogging with the owner twice daily if possible. Indoors, teach the dog to use a treadmill. Add a doggy backpack for a more strenuous workout.

Mental exercise-- Instead of feeding from a bowl, scatter or hide the food (indoors or out) so that the dog has to use his nose and work to find it.

Find toys or puzzles that can be filled with food or treats so that he/she has to manipulate the toy to get at the food.

Agility/Playground--before taking this dog to an agility class, make sure you have had him in obedience and he can be controlled in such an environment. The good news--he can be started on agility equipment without enrolling in a class. There is lots of information on the subject of making inexpensive, easy playground equipment for both indoor and outdoor use. Dogs use a tremendous amount of energy and focus learning how to master the skills.

Doggy massage--check out Tellington TTouch methods and learn to do them. They are very effective in calming and relieving stress for both owner and dog!

Good luck with your wonderful dog and remember the staff at ICBS is available for help and advice!



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January 2014