

# KINDRED PAWS

## ANIMAL TRAINING



### Skills to improve your dog's reactivity

Reactivity is an overreaction to stimulus, whether it be people, dogs, cars or a scary-looking lamp post. The behaviours we see are typically barking, lunging, snapping, and growling. Usually this is a fear-based response as your dog is feeling uncomfortable and anxious, however it can also be born out of over-excitement that leads to frustration when your dog is on lead.

Reactivity can feel like it comes out of nowhere, and often appears first when the dog is a teenager. Like humans, teenage dogs (around 6 months to 12-18 months old) stop thinking logically and let emotions take over. During this period in a dog's life, they enter 'fear stages' or times when they are more suspicious and anxious, particularly of novel stimuli. Hence, very often we see reactivity begin around this time even without a previous negative experience of the stimuli they are reactive to.

### How do we help a reactive dog

Since reactivity is an emotional response, we need to change the way our dog feels about the stimuli. We can do this through counter-conditioning and desensitisation.

If we punish our dogs when they react, this will not help them develop a positive emotional response and in fact, often makes the dog more scared or frustrated. Like any therapy, overcoming fear and anxiety can take time, and requires patience and understanding.



On the next two pages are some techniques regularly used in reactivity training plans. If you need more help with reactivity training for your dog, reach out on my website for personalised help.

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### 1) Management

The first step to helping your dog's reactivity is management. That is, managing their environment to the best of your ability to reduce the likelihood of stress and over-reactions. If your dog is consistently exposed to their triggers and is regularly practising behaviour associated with their reactivity, they will not see improvements.

So what does this look like? This may mean changing walk locations or times. Or in some cases, avoiding walks and giving our dogs a different outlet. Of course, we can't control everything - so focus on what we can control. We can control where and when we take our dogs out. We can control their enrichment and lives at home - diet, mental and physical health, and sleep patterns, all contribute to your dog's overall mental state. If we can promote a calm and positive emotional state in other aspects of their lives, this will set them up for success in their reactivity training. (This also includes loose lead training!)

### 2) This Way

The 'this way' or change of direction cue is a management skill you should practice first without the presence of a trigger. During a walk, change direction and encourage your dog to follow, providing a reward when they do. Be careful to not surprise your dog or jerk on the lead - communicate to them that you're changing direction so they can make the decision to follow. We are not dragging them away. A tip for this may be to do a slow stop with the lead, say 'this way' and use your body language or a lure to have them follow.

This skill is useful for quickly avoiding a situation when you are unprepared. If you have rewarded this cue strongly, you may be able to use it to redirect your dog once they begin over-reacting to a trigger (though note your dog may be too overwhelmed to follow directions).

### 3) Find it / Sniff

Again, this is a cue that should be practised without the presence of a trigger first. It can be used as both a management or redirection cue, however also as part of your counter-conditioning training. Simply say your cue word (e.g. Find it), and toss a treat on the ground. Make it easy for your dog to find at the beginning. They will quickly learn that 'Find it' means they should sniff around the ground for food.

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### 4) Counter Conditioning

Counter-conditioning is when we pair a trigger with a negative association with a good thing, to change that association to something neutral or positive. For our dogs, extra tasty food works well. The key to counter-conditioning is that the dog must notice the trigger first, and then be provided the food. If we give the food first, and then the dog notices the trigger, we can make the food become a predictor for the trigger and do the opposite of what we are trying to achieve. So remember - this is not about distraction.

What this looks like in practice is having your dog at a distance they can cope with from their trigger, having them look at it, and then giving them a few tasty treats in a row in quick succession. We don't need to ask anything of our dogs, they get the treats just because the trigger is there. If your dog won't take the treats, you are too close. After, we can then retreat and give our dog some decompression time away from the trigger. Counter-conditioning should be done in short sessions and aim at keeping our dogs calm and relaxed throughout.

### 5) Ignoring Triggers (Engage/Disengage Game)

To help your dog make the decision themselves to ignore triggers, whether that be exciting things or scary things, we can reinforce disengagement behaviours like looking away or sniffing. In practice, we keep a safe distance from your dog's trigger and let them look at it for a few seconds. If your dog turns their head away, even for a moment, reward. Using a marker word like 'Yes' or a clicker really helps in capturing these small, quick behaviours.

Ideally, we want your dog to make the choice to disengage without a prompt from you. At the beginning of training though, you may need to give cues to your dog to help them look away before reacting or becoming too focused on the trigger. I recommend using something subtle like a shift in your weight or movement of your foot and then progressing to less subtle cues like a tap or small noise to get their attention. Try not to use words like their name, or pulling on the leash, as we do not want these things to become a requirement for the behaviour.

As you practice this, your dog will start disengaging quicker with the trigger and redirecting their attention to you.