



How to Handle Reactive Dogs

Material adapted from original article by Patricia McConnell, March 13, 2017

I'm just back from the first phase of book tour, and so much of what came up on the dog-lover side related to "reactive" dogs. As I talk about in *The Education of Will*, dogs can be psychologically traumatized too, and one of the symptoms of that is "hyper-reactivity." Just as a veteran soldier with PTSD can react to a loud noise by throwing herself to the ground, dogs with their alarm systems fixed on HIGH are usually quick to startle to an abrupt noise, or panic when unfamiliar dogs appear.

However, dogs can be "reactive" when out walking for a variety of reasons, including a conditioned response to feeling frustrated at not being able to greet another dog if on leash, or simple fear of a dog they've never met. "Traditional" responses have been to correct dogs for lunging, snarling or barking at dogs they see on the streets, but those methods can disguise the symptoms but make the internal response even more extreme. As importantly, they don't help the dog learn a new response. I wrote extensively about this issue in 2010, and it seems like a good time to revisit those posts now. Here's a summary of the two articles I wrote on dogs who are "reactive" (meaning aggressive barking, growling, etc), as was Willie, when they see unfamiliar dogs. First, in general:

1. I'm not a fan of insisting on any one method for all dogs, except to say what to avoid: Punishment is never a good idea. Dogs are "reactive" for a variety of reasons, including being afraid of other dogs, wanting to greet other dogs and being overwhelmed with excitement or frustration about it. In addition, some dogs seem to be helped by being first taught an appropriate behavior on cue, others do better if allowed to initiate it on their own.

2. The methods that seem to work best for most people involve teaching a dog to turn and look away from another dog, BEFORE the dog begins the problematic behavior.

3. If the dog is afraid of other dogs, letting him *look away* and then *move away* from the other dog is the best reinforcement for most dogs. You can start this by teaching an Autowatch, or by waiting for him to look away himself, and reinforce it with food, play and/or an increase in distance between the dogs. I like to 'mark' the desired behavior with a clicker or just by saying "click," then reinforce with a primary reinforcer –'marking' is a more precise way of letting the dog know what behavior resulted in the reinforcement. However, years ago I didn't use a marker and had a lot of success, so there's a lot of variability in how you do this. I very much like the addition of having the subject dog move away from the other one after it has looked away and broken eye contact. If the dog truly is afraid of another, surely that is tremendously

reinforcing. Interestingly, I found that as the years went on I began moving backward three or four steps when a dog did an Autowatch . . . but didn't consciously add it to the program until recently.

4. If the dog wants to get to other dogs to interact, (and is barking because she is frustrated) then increasing the distance between her and another dog is a punishment, not a reinforcement. For these dogs, you can teach some form of polite behavior, like stopping and looking back at the owner, again long before she has reached threshold, and give her food, play or access to the other dog as a reinforcement. Needless to say, interactions should be done carefully and only with dogs who are totally trustable.

5. UNDER THRESHOLD is a key here. I've long believed it and your comments support that most people have been more successful if they set up a dog so that it can see another dog, but is far enough away that the subject dog hasn't yet begun barking and lunging and carrying on.

6. [That is why] SET UPS are tremendously helpful. Treating reactivity goes much faster if you can arrange for someone with a non-reactive dog to help you out. But if you can't, you can take advantage of situations in which you know that you can control the distance between the dogs: Perhaps there is a dog behind a fence who is not too reactive that you can use as a stimulus? Try driving to the parking lot of a dog training center, where you know the dogs will be on leash and will be moving from Point A to Point B. How about your local vet clinic? Pet Store? Just be sure to pick places where you know the other dogs will be on leash and you can be the one to control the distance between your dogs.

7. EMERGENCY U TURN: Life tends to happen to us when we didn't expect it, so everyone needs a conditioned response to a dog showing up too close or by surprise. You can use the Emergency U Turn before your dog responds to prevent trouble (and give your dog lots of reinforcement once you've turned and moved away) or you can use it to get out of a bad situation in which your dog is already reacting (just turn and move away, no reinforcement this time, but stop when you think your dog can listen and ask for an appropriate behavior.) The key is to have practiced a fast pivot and cheerful retreat, so that both you and your dog are conditioned to do it fast in an up-beat, happy way instead of being in a panic.

8. REINFORCEMENT? Remember it is defined by the receiver, so knowing what works best for your dog is crucial. If you're going to mark an appropriate behavior and reinforce it, you need to be sure you know what works best for your dog.

Here is a list of specific treatment methods you will find useful when changing your dog's response from "OH NO!" to "OH BOY!":

1. Classical Counter Conditioning: Easiest by far for a novice owner, because it requires linking the appearance of another dog with food. Dog looks at other dog, food falls from the sky (or falls on the ground, or a toy is presented. I use this sometimes to get dogs started, especially if they are super reactive. The problem with it can be that you need to be sure the dog is linking

feeling good with the another dog, not a dog paired with a person, or a person with a yellow jacket, etc.

2. Operant Conditioning, Positive Reinforcement, On Cue: In this category, a dog is taught that the stimulus of another dog approaching is a good thing, and it becomes a stimulus that causes the dog to feel relaxed rather than tense, and usually (at first) to turn away and look at its owner for a food treat or play session. This includes “AutoWatches” and “Where’s the Dog” as described in ***Feisty Fido*** or “Look at That” in Leslie McDermitt’s ***Control Unleashed***. [I’d update that to include Pat Miller’s excellent book, ***Beware of the Dog***.] “Autowatches” (turn away from the dog and look at your owner) and “Where’s the Dog/Look at That” seem to be polar opposites, but in my experience, they lead to the same response, which is that the dog becomes comfortable with the approach of another dog, and instead of barking and lunging, tends to turn away from it and look toward its owner for reinforcement. This inherently avoids the direct face-to-face confrontation that is forced by 2 dogs approaching on a leash, and has the advantage of making nervous dogs classically conditioned, such that they associate other dogs with feelings of comfort. It also teaches rude dogs (who either are frustrated that they can’t get to another dog or would love to start a stare fight) to engage in an incompatible behavior and get reinforced for it.

3. Operant Conditioning, Positive Reinforcement, No Cue, Dog Initiates Behavior: In this category, which includes what is called CAT and BAT, rather than the owner teaching the dog an incompatible behavior, the dog is exposed to the trigger stimulus and then is reinforced as soon as it performs a behavior voluntarily that is more acceptable. For example, if a dog is barking and lunging, it might be brought to a distance just close enough to elicit a reaction (I would advocate just looking at the other dog, NOT barking and lunging already). The owner/handler stops, and waits for the dog to offer a different behavior, like looking down, or turning its head to the side. As soon as that behavior is offered, either the other dog is taken away (CAT) or the subject dog is taken away (BAT).

Both methods are derivations of John Fisher’s early work, and their greatest strength is that sometimes it is preferable to let the dog choose the behavior, and also to be less focused on the handler or the food/toy and more focused on the other dog. When CAT first started a few years ago, it appeared that the dog was often allowed to go past threshold into a full blown response. The owner/trainer would wait it out, with no one moving (thus no reinforcement from the other dog leaving) until the problem behavior extinguished. From what I have seen, it being a work in progress, its advocates have begun working harder to keep the dog at lower levels of arousal. I think that’s a plus, I never like to see a dog allowed to ‘practice’ a problematic behavior, and it’s tough to wait out some dogs, given that barking can be extremely self reinforcing.

4. Operant Conditioning, Punishment: The only example of Punishment that I ever use in these cases is Trish King’s “Abandonment Training.” In this scenario, a dog is both on a leash and a long line, with the owner holding the leash as usual and a trainer holding the long line as a safety net. As they approach another dog, if the subject dog barks and lunges, the owner

throws the leash onto the dog's back (tactile cue) and runs like heck the other way. Basically, the dog is 'deserted' by the owner, and if it is bothered by that, it stops the behavior very, very quickly. I've seen it work beautifully on some dogs, but as Trish advises, this is only for clingy dogs who care deeply about being with their owner. If your dog is particularly soft, be forewarned that this technique can be really difficult for the softies to handle. In training, always use the least invasive effective method for behavioral intervention. Skip punishment altogether with every dog if you can, and skip it altogether with particularly soft dogs always. Only you know whether your dog can handle something like this "abandonment" technique. Don't risk your relationship; it's not worth it.

I'm a big advocate of having lots of tools in your tool box (thank you Terry Ryan for that phrase!), and personally I believe that being able to use all the methods described above, or some variation on them, is important for anyone who wants to do consults. For private owners, one needs to think about which method fits best with them and their dog. BAT and CAT require, I believe, a sophisticated ability to read a dog. AutoWatches and Where's the Dog require an owner who likes to train, and can learn the timing required. All methods require setting up wins, in which the dog can be gradually exposed to an increasing level of intensity (dog far away, dog closer; dog standing still, dog moving forward, etc.) and an ability to respond at the right time.

