



## WALKING LEASH REACTIVE DOGS

### IMPORTANT TERMS TO KNOW

Reactive (or Reaction): A strong, often frightening physical display of emotion; such as lunging, growling, barking, snarling or raised hackles. The reaction appears disproportionate to the situation. A reaction can serve to scare the trigger into moving away and giving the dog the appropriate distance she needs to feel safe. A reaction does not automatically mean aggression. A certified trainer should be consulted to determine the reason for the reaction.

Threshold: A dog's limit is known as her threshold; the point past where the dog can no longer process information and problem solves, and instead responds by reacting out of fear, excitement or anger.

If the dog reacts, you are WAY too close to the trigger!

Knowing when your dog is approaching her threshold is critical to help her make good decisions and retain what she has learned. The best way to keep a dog under threshold is to create as much distance as possible between the dog and her trigger to keep the dog calm and able to focus on you.

A dog that stares at a trigger without glancing away, ignores you, refuses treats or takes treats with a hard mouth is close to going over threshold. You are TOO CLOSE to the trigger.

Trigger: Anything that causes the dog to feel a strong emotion and leads to a seemingly disproportioned reaction on her part. Know your dog's triggers so you can give her the distance she needs to feel safe, and she can continue to stay in the thinking part of her brain.

Redirection: The potential for the dog to become so fixated and/or frustrated that she turns and snaps or bites the dog/person/object nearest to her. Do not attempt to touch or pet a dog who is over threshold; she could redirect or snap at you.

High Value Treat: A treat a dog considers to be really, really special. Try different rewards to see what your dog likes best.

Loose Leash Walking: With little or no tension on the leash, as a team. Refer to the Loose Leash Walking Class.

### REASONS FOR REACTIVITY

- Your dog has gotten too close to a trigger and has learned that her scary behavior will make the trigger go away.
- Your dog is frustrated and wants to get closer to the trigger to play or fight.

Regardless of the reason, allowing the dog to practice reactive behaviors does not allow the dog to learn new, more appropriate behaviors.

### THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

#### **PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR DOG!**

Follow your dogs body language ALL the time. Don't get distracted, or you may miss the subtle shifts that indicate that your dog is approaching threshold.

Changes in body language include:

- Staring or fixating on an object
- Ears going from neutral position to forward and alert or pinned back
- Tail getting stiff (may wag slightly at the tip) or get tucked under her body
- Mouth going from open and relaxed to closed.
- Piloerection (hackles raised)
- Weight slightly forward or behind, not balanced

These changes can happen in the blink of an eye. Pay attention to your dog, and the first signs of a shift in body posture, calmly put distance between your dog and the trigger.

### CREATE MORE DISTANCE

Your dog is able to sniff the ground, glance at the potential trigger but can disengage to walk away, or investigate a smell nearby if she is comfortable with her surroundings. This state of balance is your goal at all times, with every dog you walk.

### MAKE YOURSELF MORE INTERESTING THAN THE OBJECT SHE IS FIXATED ON

Practice acceptable behaviors in non-stressful situations, so you can ask for them when you need to move away from the trigger. With every new positive behavior you train, you are giving your dog alternatives to creating distance without going over threshold.

### POSITIVE BEHAVIORS TO TRAIN:

Train in a quiet environment free from distractions.

LOOK – Ask your dog to Look at you and reward generously. If she volunteers a look during a walk, mark and reward.

LET'S GO – Pat your leg, call her name, ask her to “let's go” and change the direction you are walking in. Reward when she catches up to you.

EMERGENCY U-TURN – Say Let's go in a calm manner as you cross your forearm across your stomach and turn away from the dog smoothly, so as not to jerk the leash or drag the dog. Reward when the dog has stopped the reactions and is walking AWAY from trigger. Then refocus with an alternate behavior such as FIND IT!

TOUCH – Teach the dog to touch the palm of your hand or outstretched fingers.

SPIN – dog spins in a tight circle while being lured with food. When spin is complete, throw food away from the dog to create distance from the trigger.

FIND IT! – Toss treats on the ground AWAY from the trigger, so your dog starts sniffing the ground to find the food and create distance to the trigger at the same time.

LOOK AT THAT! – A training protocol to help your dog learn to ignore triggers. To learn how to do the “Look at That” protocol, please visit this YouTube link (<https://youtu.be/V5uNP1rrk2E?si=issQKnYqZcxJ-jRC>) or reach out to a trainer for guidance.

### DO

- Walk with 2 hands lightly on the leash, as gently as possible
- Be alert to your environment. If you see a possible trigger for your dog, calmly change the course of your walk, away from the trigger
- Train a happy U-turn

- Use parked cars, buildings and greenery as barriers
- Keep Breathing! Recite something in your head as you create distance to help keep you calm.
- Do practice these techniques with your dog even when they are not reactive.

## DON'T

- Don't allow your dog to forge ahead and pull you along for the ride
- Don't allow your dog to look at another dog/person/potential trigger for more than a count of two.
- Don't stop breathing
- Don't freeze due to your own fear or indecision. Be proactive and avoid conflict by moving away from the trigger
- Don't tighten the leash
- Don't jerk the dog away
- Don't keep walking forward if your dog stops. Count to 2, then ask the dog to move in a different direction away from possible trigger.
- Don't touch, pet or try to lure in front of the nose of the dog to get her attention if she is fixated on the trigger.

You can't control triggers on walks, but you can control where you go and what you do to keep your dog from reacting. If you see the trigger before your dog does, proactively arrange your distance to the trigger so that your dog will stay relaxed when he sees it. Cross the street or move behind a car until the trigger passes, so that when your dog notices the trigger, he can make his own choices without needing more help.

If distracting doesn't work, do whatever you can to hold position and keep everyone safe in a calm manner until the trigger is gone. Assess your dog's stress level. You may need to do "Find It" to help your dog relax (toss treats to find on the ground) or head home.

For more tips or information or to get names of certified trainers, email [trainer@spcawestchester.org](mailto:trainer@spcawestchester.org)