



Reactive and Aggressive Behavior in Dogs – Living with a Reactive or Aggressive Dog

What does it take to *really* change their behavior?

First, it is necessary to understand that you can never guarantee that a reactive dog or aggressive dog will not use reactivity/aggression in the future. Any dog is capable of biting under the right circumstances.

Before beginning behavior modification, a thorough physical examination, which includes blood work, should be performed by your veterinarian to rule out any medical conditions.

We cannot erase your dog's previous behavioral history. This means that his tendency towards reactivity or aggression will always be in his toolbox. Changing the reactive/aggressive dog requires the owner to understand the cause(s) for his behavior, and the chemical and neurological changes that occur as the dog becomes reactive or aggressive. ***Reactivity and aggression are a reaction to the dog's arousal level caused by chemical changes within the brain and body, which produce consequences that reward behavior.*** Changing his behavior means that you **MUST** change the emotional state of the dog first!

We cannot punish away a reactive/aggressive dog's behavior. Any punishment of the dog's warning signs (growling, baring teeth) forces the dog into thinking that biting is the only option left. Punishment often escalates the intensity of aggression and should never be used to treat aggression! Prong collars and electronic stimulation (shock) collars should never be used on reactive/aggressive dogs. At best, punishment **SUPPRESSES** behavior and does not address the root cause(s) of reactivity/aggression.

You must learn to communicate with your dog in a way that conveys leadership and control (not the use of dominance and force!) Looking directly at, constant scanning, or targeting things in the environment is an indication of arousal. Aroused dogs lack impulse control! Owners need to understand the PHYSIOLOGICAL CHANGES and understand that when a dog is reactive it may be because he doesn't believe you can control the trigger(s) or the situation the dog is in. ***Reactivity is his way to take control of a situation that he feels confused, threatened, or anxious in, because we have failed to recognize it, and change it for him! When dogs target (stare at) common triggers, such as other dogs/people this SHOULD BE the cue for you to take immediate action.*** Part of changing reactive behavior is changing your behavior first, so that you can send the message that you can, and will, control what happens to him, that you "have his back" and can keep him safe.

Control begins with communication. When taught right, a dog's response to our communication has consequences (good or bad.) Inconsistent use of punishment leads to confusion in the dog's mind, creating arousal. Inconsistent leadership from the owner leaves the dog to fend for himself, which creates reactivity and can lead to aggression.

You must be committed to modifying behavior!

NO BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION CAN OCCUR IF THE DOG IS ALLOWED TO CONTINUE TO REHEARSE THE BEHAVIOR! This means we must avoid the situations (triggers) that produce a reactive response while we are modifying his behavior. Period. Avoiding exposure to the trigger(s) is only temporary while we teach him other skills to cope within their presence. If your dog is reactive on leash, for example, he is also rehearsing the behavior in the following ways:

Barking/Lunging at visitors when they enter or when they move around your house.

Barking/Lunging at people/other dogs outside of their home (at windows or fence lines).

Barking at people outside of the car (stationary or moving).

You must manage!

Living with a reactive/aggressive dog means taking precautionary steps to ensure that safety comes first. This means that you are willing and able to make necessary changes to ensure that your guests, family, strangers, and other dogs are always safe. It also means that you are willing to accept all liability for your dog's actions.

In households with aggression between house mates, management is MANDATORY.

You must train!

You must teach your dog other behaviors that can be used instead of reactivity/aggression. Teaching him to focus on you (with and without distractions) and to perform some other behavior(s) besides bark/lunge when on walks, or bark at people entering and in your home are just two of the training goals.

You must use the right equipment!

The equipment needed may vary based on the dog's size and the type of aggressive behavior. Head Collar systems offer more control than collars or harnesses. Leather leashes are often easier for the owner to hold onto. ***Retractable leashes should never be used when a dog is aggressive as they offer poor control and too much distance from the owner.***

Muzzles should always be considered for dogs with aggressive behavior, especially those with a previous bite history. Muzzles are not 100% fool proof, however. Basket muzzles are recommended as they allow the dog to open his/her mouth to pant and allow for easy treat delivery while counterconditioning.

Long lines can be beneficial for the dog who is accustomed to an electronic fence system. Aggressive dogs should never be allowed free access to the yard. A long line gives the owner a way to gain the dog's attention and "reel them in" if needed.

Prong collars and E collars (shock collars) should not be used to treat aggressive behavior as they typically suppress outward signs such as barking and lunging and can escalate the aggressive response. Any escalation in aggression can cause the dog to "redirect" the aggression back to others nearby at the time. This includes other familiar dogs and family members who become the unintended target of the aggression. ***Suppression of behavior is NOT real change!***

You must be open to trying new things!

We have had good success using a variety of holistic/homeopathic therapies. You may be asked to try some or all the following:

Homeopathic supplements

Body wraps

Pheromone/aromatherapy

Essential oils

Pharmacological intervention (medication) as prescribed by your veterinarian

Reality Bites!

Don't assume that your dog just needs "socialization" or "exposure" to the target of his/her reactivity/aggression to "get better". He doesn't need "more training!"

Many dogs that are aggressive really would be happier if they were not exposed to the trigger at all. Fear based; defensive aggression is one of the most common forms of aggression. Adult dogs may never be able to interact with all other dogs, and dogs with reactivity/aggression that is directed toward people may never be trustworthy around strangers.

The fact is that once a dog learns to use aggression to control something he/she views as a threat they will often use that tool again. Any dog is capable of biting under the right set of circumstances. Dogs with a history of biting are more likely to bite again. It is that simple.

Aggression is perhaps the most common reason dogs are relinquished to rescue groups and shelters. ***There are no quick fixes or magical solutions.*** You must manage him properly 100% of the time, and institute behavior modification to change the behavior! ***It may take 12-18 months to complete the protocol.***

When a dog growls, pulls, barks, lunges, snaps, or bites, he is not in control of his behavior. ***Reactivity and Aggression are the result of a chemical change in the brain as a response to a perceived threat or conflict. It is a dog's primal reaction caused by the "flight or fight" response, not a "lack of training" or a "need for socialization."***

The underlying cause(s) for the reactivity/aggression can be quite varied. Lack of early socialization (off leash play as a young puppy), inherited trait from one or both parents, previous history of a "bad" event (such as a dog fight) or primary training using prong, choke, or shock collars, including electric fence type collars, are the most common causes.

Punishment will not help change the behavior as it does not address the underlying cause and may make the reactivity worse in the long run.

Our work with aggression and reactivity has four key components. It uses a variety of **training** and **counter conditioning** techniques to help the dog feel better and modify behavior. It also helps the owner learn to read their dog and make good decisions to keep the dog from feeling the need to react or use aggression. This improves the **relationship** and allows the owner to enrich the dog's life.

We use positive reinforcement as the primary training tool. ***Management is also a key component of working with reactivity and aggression.***

Changing reactivity/aggression takes time and effort. It cannot be done at the human's pace or on our timetable. The dog's behavioral health, and sometimes future, is at stake so the focus must be the dog's feelings and how to best help him in the moment.

While we cannot guarantee that the dog won't react or use aggression in the future, we can help them feel better and lessen the stress that the dog feels every day. We can also create a better relationship!

If you would like to schedule an initial private session for your dog, please contact Brenda at (605) 549-1644 or by email at twopawsupsd@gmail.com.

At Happy Tails Dog Training Center, our mission statement says it all.

“Empowering dogs and their humans through modern, science-based training that prioritizes understanding, trust, and positive relationships. We focus on meeting the unique needs of both the client and their dog, fostering a bond built on respect and cooperation, without force or coercion.”