

# Addressing Leash Reactivity

Dogs that naturally enjoy being social can become frustrated if they aren't able to interact with other dogs or people as often as they'd like. This can sometimes lead to overly excited or energetic behavior when they spot someone new while on a leash. For the sake of their safety and overall wellbeing, it's important they learn that not every encounter will result in a greeting. Still, when they stay calm while passing others, those moments can be paired with positive experiences, so they continue to associate good things with self-control.

## Replace Problem Behaviors with Positive Alternatives

Support your dog's progress by using gentle, reward-based training methods that are recommended by leading veterinary and behavior experts. Punishment techniques can often backfire, sometimes worsening issues like aggression or even creating new problem behaviors.

By redirecting your dog's focus to a simple training task and rewarding their engagement, you encourage calmer leash manners. Over time, these positive responses can take the place of unwanted ones and become your dog's natural default behavior.

When heading out for a walk, carry small, tasty treats in a pouch or pocket. This provides a quick and effective way to reinforce the behaviors you'd like to see more often. Some useful skills to practice include:

### 1. Automatic Check-Ins

Begin by rewarding your dog anytime they offer eye contact in a quiet, low-distraction environment. The more you reinforce this, the more your dog will naturally "check in" with you. Gradually increase the level of distraction in the environment but move at a pace your dog can handle. If they stop checking in altogether, it's likely a sign you've advanced too quickly and need to take a step back.

### 2. Spotting Another Dog or Person

Gradually work up to situations where your dog sees a person or another dog from a comfortable distance without reacting. Each time they notice calmly, reward them. Over time, this creates a new pattern: *"I see another dog, then I look back to my person for a treat."* This repetition helps the dog automatically redirect their attention to you rather than fixating on the distraction.

### 3. Teaching "Turn"

The cue "turn" is especially handy when you suddenly encounter a person or dog around a corner. Say the cue, then guide your dog by placing a treat close to their nose and leading them in the opposite direction. Reward as soon as they complete the turn with you. (If your dog has a history of aggressive reactions, be cautious about putting

your hands near their mouth.) Practice this cue periodically during walks—even when no distractions are around—so it becomes second nature.

#### **4. The “Find It” Game**

Encourage your dog to switch gears by tossing a few small treats on the ground for them to sniff out. This fun activity redirects energy and provides a positive outlet when tension rises.

### **Quick Responses for Sudden Surprises**

If another dog or person appears unexpectedly:

- Cross the street.
- Make a U-turn and head in the opposite direction.
- Step off the main path until the distraction passes.
- Redirect your dog’s focus using a cue, treat, or gentle interrupter (like a hand clap or light touch) that doesn’t frighten but interrupts fixation. Immediately follow up with a rewardable behavior, such as “touch” or “turn.”
- Use natural barriers such as trees, bushes, vehicles, or buildings to block your dog’s view, then keep them busy with rewards or simple cues.

If your dog reacts, calmly guide them farther away until they can settle down. Then reevaluate perhaps the trigger was too close, or the situation progressed too quickly. Avoid harsh corrections like leash jerks, as these can worsen negative feelings toward other dogs.

### **Managing the Environment**

Success depends on setting your dog up with situations they can handle:

- Remove your dog or lower the intensity if they begin to struggle.
- Avoid high-stimulation environments, like busy festivals, that may overwhelm them.
- Use distance to your advantage—keep far enough away that your dog stays calm and able to focus on you.
- Choose quieter walking times or areas with multiple route options so you can change direction when needed.

### **Why Early Action Matters**

Leash reactivity tends to escalate if left unchecked. At first, your dog may only show mild unease or excitement when seeing another person or dog. But repeated stressful encounters can build anticipation and frustration, leading to faster and more intense reactions—even from a distance. What may have started as friendly excitement can evolve into aggressive displays over time.

## Early Warning Signs to Watch For

- Tightened muscles
- Upright, rigid stance
- Stopping suddenly and staring intently
- Pulling hard on the leash toward the trigger
- Jumping, spinning, or rearing up on hind legs
- A tail that rises higher than normal. For breeds with naturally curled tails, the curl may tighten or sit higher over the back.
- A tail wag that is stiff, fast, and held high.
- Ears standing tall and angled forward.
- The mouth closing, sometimes pulling back into a tight “smile” or pushing forward with pursed lips.
- Strong, unwavering focus on the approaching person or dog.
- Lip licking.
- Vocalizations such as whining.
- Barking, which may include higher-pitched yelps meant to draw the other dog or person closer.

When dogs show these heightened, energetic responses on leash, it's a window into how they're feeling inside. If their body language appears unsettled and overstimulated, it usually reflects that emotionally, they are struggling to calm themselves as well.

Catching and redirecting these signals early is key to preventing escalation and helping your dog build calmer, safer habits.

