

Are You Causing Your Dog's Reactivity?

When doing therapy dog work it is imperative that your dog is a calm and confident dog. They need to be able to ignore other dogs, humans, equipment, strange smells and environments, loud weird noises, and more. At the same time, they need to be able to calmly greet the very humans they are intended to "help" while being able to ignore others who do not want a visit from your dog.

Some dogs may have been able to perform their tasks quite well, but as time goes by, they may have developed some reactivity to those same stimuli they successfully ignored before. Why does this happen and how to prevent it? This article will (hopefully) provide some BASIC tips to help prevent reactivity from developing in an otherwise well-trained dog and may even help you to correct it. It is NOT a deep dive into solving extreme reactivity cases, those types of cases are best handled in person as training can be very individualized based on the dog and reasons for the reactions.

So how can you be the cause of your dog's reactivity? Imagine that every time you walk your dog you see a parent and child walking towards you. And every time you see them you unconsciously pull the leash up tight. Over time your dog may decide that, because you tense up and/or act stressed over the appearance of the parent-child pair, he doesn't like them and acts on those feelings. Thus, producing the reactivity. If you see another dog and yank your dog back into position every time you can cause your dog to not like seeing other dogs. Imagine for a minute this is what goes through your dog's head: "Oh look a dog! My owner hates other dogs and gets upset! I should bark and chase them away!" or how about this one: "Oh look a dog! Every time I see a dog I get this pain in my neck. I hate other dogs because they cause pain!"

As we all know, dogs are pack animals. They are hardwired to alert or protect their pack and their resources from intruders (this includes homes/den and space/territory and you). Even some friendly dogs will bark an alert that someone is coming, even when happy to see that person. Another way that you can cause reactivity in your dog is by walking the exact same route every single day without any change. Over time this dog may begin to think this route is part of his territory. When they see a new dog or other "intruder" they may react, thinking they are protecting their resources.

How do we prevent this type of reactivity? Change your walking route. Take your dog to new places. Keep up with positive reinforcement training and keep your walking skills sharp. YOUR skills. Be aware of the signals you may inadvertently be sending to your dog. Do additional training such as agility, nose work, and trick training (just to name a few) to keep the lines of communication between you and your dog sharp and to help them to be a confident dog in all situations. These activities will help you to keep your dog handling skills sharp as well. Doing additional activities also helps to relieve boredom. If your dog has a "boring" life, then seeing another dog may be the most exciting thing that happens to them and they may lose control and "over" react. This too can create reactivity. Learn to stay calm and respond rather than react to changing situations, this will help your dog do the same.

Most importantly, remember that training never ends. Dogs are opportunists. It benefits you both if you keep your training fresh and exciting. Praise your dog always for good behavior. Now go do more with your dog!