Leash Reactivity with Look, Here, and Counterconditioning

Causes

Leash reactivity and aggression are extremely common. These behaviors generally stem from fear, anxiety, and conflict, although some dogs can simply be frustrated. Dogs with this type of aggression or reactivity may be genetically predisposed, have suffered a traumatic incident on leash, or have learned to behave this way. Some dogs may be perfectly fine off of the leash, but not when the leash is on.

This behavior is often compounded by years of reinforcement: When the dog reacts, the stimulus disappears. Even if this is inadvertent (the stimulus disappears because it was simply going in the opposite direction), the dog’s outburst is reinforced. If the dog isn’t given any alternate direction, such as to what they can do to stay safe, the behavior may snowball until the outbursts are very intense.

Management & Behavior Modification

Your dog’s treatment plan involves both management and behavior modification. Management includes steps you can take to control your dog’s environment. Behavior modification exercises help to treat your dog’s behavior on a physiological and cognitive level.

Management

- Do not walk your dog off-leash outside of a fenced area.
- Walk your dog at times when you are unlikely to encounter people, dogs or other stimuli that cause him to react.
- Scan the environment to make sure that you see dogs, people or other frightening stimuli before your dog does.
- When on walks and your dog reacts…
  - Don’t tighten up on the leash or reach for him.
  - Do ask him, in your happiest voice, to head in the opposite direction away from the frightening stimulus. You can use a distraction like a food lure to get him to turn away from the stimulus.
- Gear for walks
• Use the recommended head collar or harness and a non-retractable leash.

• Always carry small, high-value treats with you on walks.

• Get a treat bag that stays open so that you don’t have to reach into your pocket for treats. It will improve your timing.

• Hold your leash with two points of contact.

Behavior Modification Skills

• **Look!**

  This exercise teaches your dog to *look at the stimulus* he normally reacts to on cue.

  • **What it looks like**
    You say, “Fido, look!”. Your dog looks at the stimulus. You treat your dog while he is looking, and then repeat the sequence.

  • **When you use it**
    When your dog can calmly look at the stimulus.

  • See the “Look” handout for instructions on how to teach this behavior.

• **Here**

  This exercise teaches your dog to turn away from the stimulus and come to you.

  • **What it looks like**
    You say “here” and take a few steps backward, away from the stimulus. Your dog turns away from the stimulus and comes to you. You feed your dog continuously while the stimulus passes. You are facing the stimulus, your dog is facing away from it.

  • **When you use it**
    When your dog begins to show signs of stress or escalation toward reacting.

  • See the Here handout for instructions on how to teach this behavior.

• **Counterconditioning**

  Counterconditioning reinforces calm behavior in the presence of the stimulus and forms a strong association between the stimulus and high value treats.

  • **What it looks like**
    You treat your dog repeatedly for calm behavior in the presence of the stimulus. No verbal cues are given.
• **When you use it**
  When your dog is able to remain calm in the presence of the stimulus while not performing an operant behavior (a cued behavior).

• See your discharge information for instructions on how to teach this behavior.

**Using these Skills Together**

These skills can and should be used together. Each of them is designed to use when your dog is behaving in a particular way. You can switch between skills as your dog’s behavior changes.

**Here is when each of the skills are applied:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counterconditioning</th>
<th>Calm when not given a cue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look</td>
<td>Calm when cued to look</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here</td>
<td>Showing slight signs of stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat</td>
<td>Reacting or escalating quickly, unable to do “here”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What this looks like in practice:**

Fido is reactive toward other dogs. He is out on a walk with his owner and they turn a corner to see a dog standing with his owner about 50 feet away, on the other side of the street.

• The owner cues “look” before Fido even sees the other dog. Fido scans the area and looks at the dog. The owner feeds him a treat while he looks and then cues “look” and feeds him again a few more times.

• After a few repetitions, she notices Fido is **very calm**. She **switches to counterconditioning**, simply feeding him every 5 or so seconds while he stays calm. Sometimes Fido is looking at the dog, and sometimes he is not.

• The other dog and his owner begin walking toward them. Fido is still fairly calm when the dog is about 30 feet away, but now he is not looking away from the dog. He is looking tense. His owner cues him to “look”. She repeats a few times, and sometimes Fido even looks away from the dog and back at her until she cues him to look again.

• The other dog sees Fido and barks as they pass. Fido’s **body starts to tense** and he huffs. His owner immediately cues “here” and backs away from the other dog, Fido turns away and faces his owner, eating the treats she is giving him continuously.

• After a few seconds, the other dog is further away again, and Fido is **calmly** eating his treats. He can still see the other dog, so the owner cues “look” and feeds him, repeating this until the dog is out of sight.
• Just before the end of their walk, Fido spots two off-leash dogs playing. He begins **reacting**, barking and lunging on his leash. His owner cues “here”, but he doesn’t respond. They **retreat** in the opposite direction. His owner takes a handful of treats, puts them to his face, and lures him away quickly, using a happy tone of voice.