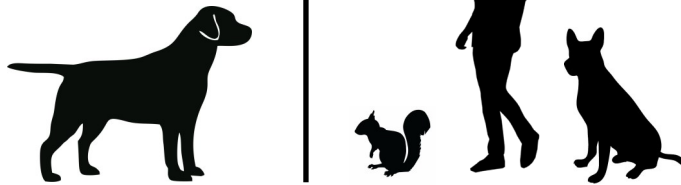


Barrier Reactivity

Some dogs love to play with other dogs or people, but if they're behind a fence in their yard or a window in their home, they may bark, lunge, or snarl at anyone who walks by. While this can be scary and seem like aggression, much of the time this behavior is actually rooted in fear, overexcitement, stress, anxiety, or frustration.

It can be easy to think that your dog is just entertaining herself or playing, but these activities actually cause a physical stress response. In the following sections, we'll go over how to reduce these stressors through training and management.

Barrier: Window, gate, fence, door



Trigger or stimulus: Can be a human (either someone familiar or a stranger), another dog, a passing vehicle, a particular sound, or even something flapping in the breeze

Management

First, you'll want to focus on reducing your dog's exposure to the trigger through management. This is an important step because your dog is learning through every experience and interaction she has. That means that every time she gets a chance to react to the trigger, she's practicing and getting better at her response. The longer you let your dog react, the harder it will be to change this behavior.

To limit your dog's access to the trigger(s), arrange your dog's environment so that she won't have the opportunity to react. For example, if your dog normally reacts to people and dogs that walk by the window, close the curtains to block your dog's view, block access to that area of the home, or set up a different area for your dog in another room.

Training

Once you've changed her environment to reduce reactivity, you can start teaching your dog about what to do **INSTEAD** of reacting. One way to do this is to **redirect** your dog's attention away from the trigger and towards a healthier outlet like a plush or interactive toy, some fun brain games, or training sessions with you! Interactive toys are great because the dog has to figure out how to get the yummy treats out of the toy. That extra bit of brain effort usually helps distract dogs from the trigger for a period of time, while the treats really help motivate them to stay focused and keep playing with the toy instead of reacting.



How to Redirect

If you know your dog is going to be in a situation where she is more likely to react, clip a drag leash (or a long 15-20ft leash) to her collar. A drag leash is simply a light weight leash that is attached to your dog's collar and allowed to drag on the ground. Drag leashes (and long leashes) are important because they act as an extension or handle so you can reach your dog more easily while still giving her the feeling of free movement.

Let's say that your dog is reacting to something outside at the fence.

1. First try to call them away from the fence by cheerfully calling her name, patting your leg, and clapping your hands. If your dog comes to you, throw a party! Give your dog a lot of pets, praise, treats, and then redirect her to a plush or interactive toy, or brain games/training session.
2. If that's not working, try to get your dog to move away from the fence and toward you.
3. Calmly approach her to pick up the leash and physically move her away from the fence. With a long leash, you may not even have to be close—you can just start gently reeling her in and away from the fence.
4. Once you have her far enough away from the fence so that she is no longer reacting, redirect her to the healthy alternative.

While management and training can control barrier reactivity, it's important to remember that you have to be consistent or it'll come right back. Reactivity has a strong positive feedback loop, and each instance will encourage further misbehavior. That is why your dog should not be left in a situation where she can be reactive without you there to step in. Consistency is key!

Teaching a Positive Replacement Behavior

You can also start working on some basic obedience skills like "come" and "place" that you can use when your dog is being barrier reactive. It's VERY important to not use either of these commands in this situation until your dog is about 90% consistent responding to them inside of the home, and outside when your dog is not being barrier reactive. Until your dog is reliably responding to these cues in normal situations, use the method detailed above first.

Once you have that, you can use it as a positive behavior to replace the reactivity. In other words, you are asking your dog to not do that (be barrier reactive) but you CAN go to place or you CAN come to me. Make sure that your dog is getting tons of treats and praise for choosing the good behavior! Using a long leash is a great tool while working on these cues because so if you accidentally give the cue before it's reliable enough and your dog does not respond correctly, you can help her succeed.

A Tired Dog is a Good Dog

Take a close look at your dog's daily activity and identify areas where maybe she's not getting enough physical or mental exercise. For example, dogs left outside all day with nothing to do are at a high risk for developing barrier reactivity; while fence-fighting and fence-running are stressful, many dogs also find it rewarding and will do it to fight boredom.

Tire your dog out with regular exercise, mental stimulation like training, and give her puzzle toys when she's alone for long periods of time. You can also hide food and treats across the house or backyard, giving her a day-long scavenger hunt.