

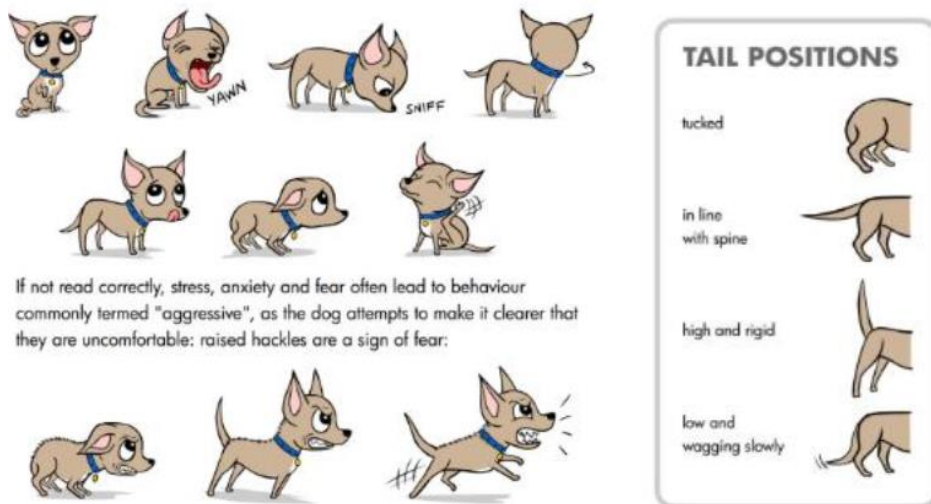
## Caring for a Reactive Dog

Living with and supporting a reactive dog - a dog who growls, barks, or lunges at exciting or stressful things in their environment - can be both challenging and incredibly rewarding. To help a dog who exhibits these behaviors successfully navigate the world, it's important to meet them where they are by having realistic expectations for what life with them might look like, managing their environment to help them be as successful as possible, and teaching them alternative behaviors to growling, barking, and lunging when they see the same exciting or stressful stimulus.

**Adjust your expectations:** While there is training that can be done to help your reactive dog learn alternative behaviors to barking and lunging, it is likely that some degree of management will always be required to ensure success. If you are hoping for a dog who can easily navigate city streets, or calmly visit dog friendly stores and restaurants, you'll need to adjust your thinking. A good place to start is to identify the activities and environments that your dog already enjoys and can comfortably navigate, and think about how you can take your dog's likes and dislikes into account when deciding where you will take them and what you will ask them to do when they get there. There is always a chance that your dog can learn to expand their bubble, but not without thoughtful management and a training plan that allows your dog to progress at their own pace. Each time they are pushed past their comfort level and practice barking, growling, lunging at something, they are more likely to repeat that behavior the next time. This makes for slower progress and a more frustrating experience for everyone.

**Reading body language:** Once appropriate expectations have been set, the next step is to identify when they are uncomfortable by reading their body language. Pay close attention to their body language both when they are comfortable and when they are alert, aroused, or reacting so that you can identify when they are having a hard time. Pay attention to what is going on in the environment when you notice your dog's behavior change. Those "triggers" will be useful tools when teaching more relaxed, polite behaviors. Closely manage your dog's environment to limit exposure to those things that are hard. When their environment is well managed, you can begin to introduce some targeted training to help them more comfortably navigate the world they live in.

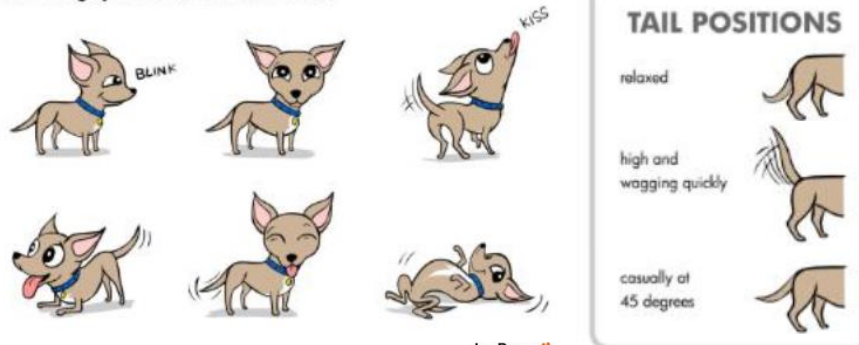
### FEARFUL / ANXIOUS / STRESSED



## Caring for a Reactive Dog

### CONTENT / HAPPY / SOCIAL

These dogs pose no immediate threat.



Brought to you by **JezRose**  
canine behaviour specialist

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**What can you do to change your dog's behavior?** Consider how your dog is learning. Dogs do what works for them to get the consequences, or reinforcers, that they want. Behavior that is reinforced will continue to happen. If your dog wants distance from something that is making him uncomfortable, barking and growling might work to get that scary thing to go away, or gains him access to moving away from that scary thing! Or maybe those same behaviors work to get mom or dad to pet him or pick him up. Think about what happens immediately after those reactive behaviors to identify what might be reinforcing them. If the behavior is reinforced, or if it worked to get what your dog wants, it is likely to continue. We can use this information to inform the decisions we make when *training*. Also note what happens just before the reactive behavior so that you can better anticipate and avoid those situations, this is referred to as *management*.

**MANAGEMENT:** One of the best things you can do to help your reactive dog learn more appropriate or desirable behavior is to keep them from having opportunities to practice the undesirable behavior. The more they are able to practice barking, growling, and lunging at things in the world, the better they will become at those behaviors. Things to consider might include walking at times of day or evening when other people and dogs aren't usually around, driving your dog to a less populated area for walks, and avoiding places where you know lots of people tend to bring their dogs such as parks or common walking or biking trails. You may also consider limiting your dog's ability to see dogs or people outside your home by keeping shades closed, adding frosted film to windows, or using gates or closed doors to limit access to rooms in the front of the house, all meant to limit their ability to practice those behaviors.

**TRAINING:** First, we recommend teaching your dog to check-in with you often, meaning that your dog looks back and up at you, making eye contact. Ideally, they will offer this behavior often for short durations. A dog who is frequently looking back to their handler is less likely to notice or become very focused on things within their environment, and is easier to give instruction to should you need to ask for a different behavior. Teaching your dog to check-in is as easy as marking with a verbal "yes!" each time they turn their head back to you, and then following quickly with a treat. Remember, behavior that is reinforced will continue to happen, so if your dog is always given the information that "yes, I do want you to look at me often while we walk!", and is subsequently given a treat for that behavior, they are much more likely to continue offering that behavior going forward.

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## Caring for a Reactive Dog

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Second, teach your dog to walk on a loose leash. A dog who is calmly walking near their handler is much more likely to remain calm and participate in training throughout their walk, as opposed to a dog who is pulling forward with consistent tension on their leash and maintaining vigilant focus on their environment. Pulling on leash is often reinforced by being allowed to move forward. In other words, a dog pulls because it works to get where they want to go faster. We can use this knowledge of what is currently reinforcing pulling to instead teach your dog to walk more politely. If your dog pulls, stop walking. Stand firmly with the leash at your core (hold with two hands!) and quietly wait for your dog to release the tension on the leash. When they do release this tension you can use the verbal marker "yes!" and resume walking. It will take your dog time to learn the new rules: pulling gets you nowhere, walking nicely gets you wherever you want to go. If your dog takes multiple steps on a loose leash you will be able to start to mark "yes!" and reinforce with treats, pets, praise, or anything your dog finds rewarding. If your dog has experience with clicker training you can use a click/treat for sequential steps on a loose leash.

Finally, teaching your dog to engage with and disengage from things in the environment will serve you both in reaching your goals of adjusting reactive behaviors to calm behaviors, making walks more enjoyable for both of you!

*See reverse for more details about engage-disengage.*

**General training philosophy:** The philosophy that we hope all of our adopters will adopt for their new dog is one based on a strong bond and clear communication between you and your dog. The general idea is that you will arrange your dog's environment in a way that will make them most likely to succeed. When training, your dog should never be so stressed, aroused, or excited that they're not able to behave normally.

Good, desirable behavior should *always* be reinforced, even if the behavior is as simple as standing quietly and looking up at you and the reinforcement is as simple as making eye contact with a smile and telling them they're good. You should never assume that they know they've done the right thing, make sure you tell them every time. Likewise, you should never assume that they know what the right thing to do is – they won't know unless you teach them. When undesirable behavior happens, your response should be to ignore (if it's safe to do so), or to neutrally end the interaction.

Even if you're really frustrated, avoid yelling at or physically manipulating your dog in any way. The last thing you want to do is anything that will make them afraid of you – that will make training really difficult moving forward. If your dog is showing reactive behavior that is unmanageable, quickly but neutrally remove them from the situation. Make a mental note that something in the environment was too hard, and think about how you can set it up better next time so your dog will be more likely to succeed.

## Caring for a Reactive Dog

# THE ENGAGE-DISENGAGE GAME

A training game for dogs who are FEARFUL, ANXIOUS, or FRUSTRATED around a specific trigger such as another dog, person, or sound. The goal is to first decrease the dog's fear/anxiety/frustration and then to teach the dog a new safe and appropriate behavior to do instead.

- PREP:**
- High value treats
  - Clicker (or verbal marker)
  - Humane harness or collar
  - Practice fast u-turns by luring your dog with a treat on his nose, or tossing "find-it" treats on the ground as you both walk away quickly in the opposite direction.
  - Take a break if you see subtle stress signals (displacement behaviors) such as excessive lip licking, yawning, or scratching.



PLAY FOR 1-5 MINUTES. TAKE A BREAK. REPEAT.

### LEVEL 1: ENGAGE



#### LEVEL 1 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row at the same distance before moving on to LEVEL 2. A successful repetition is when your dog immediately turns back to you after the click.

If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, keep playing LEVEL 1 until your dog has calmly looked at (or engaged with) the trigger from every direction. Then move on to LEVEL 2.

### LEVEL 2: DISENGAGE



#### LEVEL 2 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row before moving 1-5 steps closer to the trigger. A successful repetition is when your dog comfortably disengages with the trigger on his own.

As you move closer, keep playing LEVEL 2 if the trigger is not moving or changing in intensity. If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, go back to LEVEL 1 at the new distance.

