

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: On Leash Reactivity and Barrier Frustration

What is on-leash reactivity?

On-leash reactivity (OLR) is when a dog reacts to someone or something specifically while they are on leash. This is often seen in the form of pulling towards the trigger and jumping, barking, lunging, and/or growling at it. Reactivity can occur for a variety of reasons and in a variety of situations; what makes something on-leash reactivity is that the response to the trigger occurs as a result of the dog being on-leash. Often, the dog's response to that same trigger is different when they meet in an off-leash situation. An example of this is a dog who tenses, lunges, barks, and growls when other dogs approach when they are out on a walk, but when let off-leash at the dog park plays nicely with all the other dogs. The dog's body language and behaviors are completely different in the two situations, even though they are responding to the same thing (other dogs). On-leash reactivity can develop through frustration: the dog may be frustrated that they cannot approach a dog they want to play with because they are restrained by the leash. It can also develop as a response to things the dog finds scary while they are out on walks: the dog may be fearful of skateboards and barks at them as a means of getting them to go away. Anything can be a trigger to the dog. The dog is not being protective or "aggressive", but rather is reacting to something that they either want to move closer to (frustration) or something they wants to move away from (fear-based). Whatever the reason for a dog's reactivity, and whatever the triggers for it are, the way to work with it is similar. Below are some steps you can take to work on your dog's behavior.

What is barrier frustration?

Barrier frustration is something that occurs when a dog really wants to approach something but there is a barrier preventing them from approaching. On-leash reactivity is a form of barrier reactivity, but barrier reactivity is a more general term and can be observed in response to different barriers, like fences or doors. It Barrier frustration usually results in the dog lunging towards and barking at the thing they want to reach. A common example of this seen in a shelter setting is a dog who barks and lunges at the front of their kennel when someone comes up to visit, but as soon as you open the kennel door, the dog's body immediately relaxes and then approach you softly, seeking attention. With the barrier present (the kennel door) it appears that the dog is trying to make you go away, but as soon as the barrier is removed the dog is social and affectionate.

Steps to work on reactivity:

- Determine what your dog's triggers are. A trigger is something your dog reacts to by lunging towards it, barking, and/or growling. Some examples of common triggers are other dogs, people, children, skate boards, roller blades, and scooters. Anything can be a trigger and it is important to know what your dog's are.
- When passing by a trigger, try to create as much space between your dog and the trigger you are passing as possible. This may mean crossing the street or stepping in between parked cars.
- As soon as your dog catches sight of the trigger, talk to them in a happy, excited voice and begin feeding them small pieces of a really high value food, such as chicken, hot dogs, or cheese.
- Continue talking to your dog and feeding them really great treats until the trigger is no longer in sight. Feed your dog treats regardless of their behavior towards the trigger as we want them to begin realizing that when another dog is around, great treats are coming from you.
- As your dog begins to learn a treat is coming when a trigger is around and the reactivity decreases, encourage them to look at you by talking in a happy voice and calling your dog. When your dog does look at you, reward them with a treat every time.
- As your dog is doing well with this, you can begin to decrease the distance you keep between them and the triggers.
- When working with a reactive dog, the best equipment to use is a front clip harness or a head halter. These tools work on the principle of leverage and make lunging easier to control. Please refer to our Leash Walking Outfits flyer for more information, including pictures, of front clip harnesses and head halters.

What not to do!

We caution against the use of aversive tools or trainers who describe themselves as aversive, balanced, or mixed-method. Aversive tools include things like shock collars, prong collars, and choke chains – tools that teach through fear, pain, and intimidation. Aversive techniques do not change a dog's emotional response to stimuli; rather, they shut down behaviors. These approaches also often punish the warning so escalation becomes "sudden" and more severe. Shock collars (sometimes describes as "vibration" collars) are sometimes thought of as quick-fixes but they create long-term tragedies by teaching avoidance and immobility, also known as learned helplessness.

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>