

# Understanding Leash Reactivity: Navigating the Walk

Walking your dog should be a time for bonding and relaxation, but when your dog reacts to every passing cyclist, runner, or other dog, it can quickly become a source of stress for both of you. Understanding the "why" behind these reactions is the first step toward a calmer, more confident walk.

## What is Leash Reactivity?

Leash reactivity is an overreaction to stimuli while a dog is on a leash. A reactive dog is often a friendly one that simply feels overwhelmed, frustrated, or trapped by the restriction of the leash. When a dog is off-leash, they have the freedom to move away from things that make them uncomfortable; on a leash, that choice is taken away, leading to a "fight or flight" response.

## What Does it Look Like?

Reactivity can manifest in various ways, often escalating quickly if the trigger isn't managed. Common signs include:

- **Vocalizing:** Intense barking, whining, or growling.
- **Physicality:** Lunging, pulling toward the trigger, or spinning.
- **Body Language:** Hyper-focusing (staring), stiffening of the body, or a tucked tail.
- **Displacement:** Frantic sniffing, redirected nipping at the leash, or an inability to take treats.

## What Causes It?

While every dog is an individual, leash reactivity usually stems from one of three emotional roots:

1. **Fear/Anxiety:** The dog feels unsafe and uses "big" behaviors to create distance and drive the "scary thing" away.
2. **Frustrated Greeting:** The dog actually wants to say hello but becomes frustrated because the leash prevents them from reaching the other dog or person.
3. **Lack of Agency:** The feeling of being restrained can increase a dog's arousal levels, making them more sensitive to their environment than they would be if they were free to move.

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# 1. Identifying Thresholds: When to Train vs. When to Exit

Identifying a dog's threshold is the most critical skill in leash reactivity training. A **threshold** is the figurative "line in the sand"—the specific distance at which a dog can perceive a trigger (like another dog or a cyclist) without losing their ability to think and learn. To train effectively, you must stay **below threshold**, where the dog is aware of the trigger but remains calm enough to take treats and listen to cues.

## Subtle "Whispers" of Stress

Before a dog reaches a full-blown reaction, they usually show subtle signs that they are approaching their limit. Watch for these:

- **The "Hard Stare":** Instead of a glance, the dog locks eyes on the trigger and won't look away.
- **Closed Mouth:** A dog that was panting suddenly closes their mouth and becomes very still.
- **Lip Licking or Yawning:** These are "displacement" behaviors used to self-soothe when they feel internal pressure.
- **Refusing High-Value Treats:** If your dog normally loves chicken but refuses it when they see another dog, they have crossed their threshold.

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## 2. Training: The "Engage-Disengage" Game

This game helps change any negative associations your dog has with seeing "triggers" to more positive ones. It also teaches your dog that seeing a trigger is a "cue" to check in with you. The Engage-Disengage Game should be played strictly when your dog is **Below Threshold**. If they begin to show signs that a reaction is coming, it's time to move farther away from the "trigger".

1. **Step 1 (Engage):** When your dog notices a trigger but is still calm, mark it immediately with a "Yes!" or a click and give a high-value treat.
2. **Step 2 (Disengage):** Once they start looking at you automatically upon seeing a trigger, wait one second. If they look at the trigger and then *voluntarily* look back at you, mark with a "Yes!" and give a "Jackpot" (multiple treats).

# 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

- 1 Start at a safe distance away from the trigger, where your dog is not reacting. Be quiet and still so your dog notices the trigger on his own.
- 2 **CLICK!**  
At the precise moment your dog ENGAGES by looking at the trigger, CLICK!
- 3 When your dog turns his head towards you after the click, feed a treat.  
**If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.**

### 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

- 1 Let your dog notice the trigger again, but now wait 1-5 seconds to see if he will offer to LOOK AWAY from the trigger on his own.  
**If your dog is fixating on the trigger for longer than 5 seconds, GO BACK to LEVEL 1.**
- 2 **CLICK!**  
At the precise moment your dog DISENGAGES by looking away from the trigger, CLICK!
- 3 After the click, feed a treat.  
**If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.**

### 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.

### 3. Management: Your Safety Net

When your dog is **Over Threshold**, training stops and management begins.

- **Increase Distance:** Be the navigator. Cross the street or duck behind a car to give your dog the space they need.
  - **Visual Barriers:** Use your body, a fence, or a bush to block the dog's view and lower their stress level.
  - **The "Emergency U-Turn":** Practice a cheerful "Let's go!" and a 180-degree turn at home so you can exit a stressful situation quickly in the real world.
  - **Manage the Home:** Prevent window barking. If your dog practices reactivity at home, their general stress levels stay high, making walks much harder.
  - **Safety Note:** For maximum control during walks, always utilize the Thumb Lock and Elbow Lock (detailed in the [Leash Manners](#) section). Keeping the dog's center of mass close to your own core prevents you from being pulled off balance during a lunging episode.
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### 4. The Role of Enrichment in Reactivity

Training doesn't just happen on the sidewalk. A dog whose mental and physical needs are met at home will have much higher resilience during walks.

- **Lowering Arousal:** Calming enrichment, such as lickmats or snuffle mats, encourages repetitive licking and sniffing, which lowers a dog's heart rate.
- **The Power of the "Sniffari":** On days when your dog is too overstimulated, opt for a "Sniffari"—allowing your dog to lead the way and sniff as much as they want on a long leash in a quiet area.
- **Building Agency:** Using puzzle feeders allows your dog to solve problems, which helps build confidence.

For more DIY ideas, visit our full [Ultimate Guide to Dog Toys & Enrichment](#).

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### Need Extra Support?

Working through on-leash reactivity is a journey, and you don't have to do it alone.

- **Connect with Our Experts:** Go to [Training at Pet Alliance](#) to sign up for Private Training or Group Classes.