

Dog-Dog Reactivity

Understanding dogs who react to unfamiliar dogs on walks

Dog-dog reactivity describes behaviours such as barking, lunging, growling or pulling towards other dogs. Whilst these behaviours can appear aggressive, they are often driven by fear, frustration or both. Understanding the emotions behind the behaviour helps support positive behaviour change. **Our goal is not to allow dogs to rehearse highly emotional reactions, but to help them feel calmer around unfamiliar dogs.**

WHY DO DOGS REACT TO OTHER DOGS?

Dogs may **react excessively** to unfamiliar dogs for **different reasons**, e.g.



Many dogs fall somewhere in the middle and may experience both emotions at the same time.

THE OPEN BAR PRINCIPLE

One of the most effective ways to help reactive dogs is to change how they feel about the presence of unfamiliar dogs.



♥ Remember: the appearance of another dog should make good things happen.

Over time, this can help teach your dog that the presence of unfamiliar dogs predicts positive outcomes rather than stress, worry or frustration.

SOCIAL BUFFER ZONE

A social buffer zone is the distance your dog needs from other dogs to remain calm, comfortable and able to learn.



Increasing distance is often one of the most effective behaviour change strategies available.

Creating a buffer zone may involve:

- 🚧 Crossing the road
- 🚦 Using visual barriers
- 🌳 Choosing quieter routes
- 🔄 Turning and walking away

💡 The goal is not avoidance forever.
The goal is creating enough space for learning to occur.

COMMON MISTAKES

- ❌ Forcing greetings with unfamiliar dogs.
- ❌ Allowing repeated rehearsal of barking and lunging.
- ❌ Taking dogs too close to triggers too quickly.
- ❌ Assuming all reactive dogs are aggressive.
- ❌ Waiting for behaviour to worsen before seeking help.

💣 Punishing a dog for reacting to other dogs is like **pouring fuel on a fire**. Adding punishment to an *already* emotional situation increases stress and makes behaviour worse over time.

TOP TIPS

- ✓ Create a social buffer zone around your dog.
- ✓ Use distance to help your dog remain calm and responsive.
- ✓ Pair the presence of unfamiliar dogs with high-value rewards.
- ✓ Remember that fear and frustration can look very similar.
- ✓ Prevent rehearsal of barking and lunging wherever possible.
- ✓ Consider a muzzle if there is any possibility of your dog reaching another dog.
- ✓ Seek professional support early if your dog's behaviour is affecting walks.

KEY MESSAGE

Behind every bark, lunge or growl is an emotion.
Understanding that emotion is the first step towards helping your dog feel safer, calmer and more comfortable around unfamiliar dogs.



NEED MORE HELP?

Behaviour concerns are often easier to address when support is sought *early*. Did you know most pet insurance companies cover the costs of clinical behaviourists?



Dr Michelle Lord

Clinical Animal Behaviourist
PhD • CCAB • APBC

📞 07944 577891
✉ michelle@co-evolve.co.uk
🌐 www.co-evolve.co.uk



This resource has been produced by

Dr Michelle Lord and *Co-Evolve* ♥