

# Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

## Golden Rule Training

### The Reactive Dog

#### What Defines a Dog as Reactive?

Reactivity is a term originated by dog trainers and owners who own dogs that overreact to certain stimuli; we refer to these stimuli as “triggers.” For your dog, the trigger may be the sight of another dog, people they do not know, people and dogs walking nearby, skateboards, the doorbell, and the neighbor kids making loud noises, or any new sound or situation. The root cause of the reaction comes from fear, excitement or even dominance. The symptoms may include barking, whining, growling, snarling, circling and even lunging in an attempt to frighten the person or the other dog.

Your dog may be able to tolerate his trigger from a distance, but when it comes too close he reaches his threshold, and then you see the reaction. Any breed can be reactive, but it may also be inherent of the dog's breed or it could be from a lack of social experience or possibly scary experience in their past.

Overall, dogs that are reactive can benefit from obedience training, dog-dog socialization and a few simple management tools. If you own a reactive dog, there is hope!

#### Reasons for Reactive Behavior

If you have a reactive dog, the main reasons for your dog's reactions could be fear (lack of confidence), defense of territory (dominance), a learned behavior, lack of socialization with people and/or other dogs, or even a health issue can play a role. Other than a health issue, the behavior modification steps can change your dog's behavior for the better.

1. **Fear** can cause many reactions and can look like aggression, but it is fear driving the behavior not dominance. Once the dog is past his threshold, there is a reaction; at this point fight or flight takes over for fearful dogs and the reaction can be a warning growl, snarl, barking, or to run away! If they can't run away, they are left warning and if that does not work, fighting. The fearful dog has to feel threatened to fight; however, in some cases a fearful dog may even offer their belly as a sign of “I am no threat to you, please don't hurt me.”
  - a. Working with fearful dogs takes time and a lot of patience. Go slow, introduce new things and/or people very slowly. When they are calm and non-reactive, praise and reward with a treat, and never reward for a fear response or reaction (*for more information see our article on Fearful Dogs on the HB website under Golden Rule Training*).
  - b. *Never correct a dog for his reaction, the added stress can make it worse; it is best to turn around or move away from his trigger by calmly saying, “Let's go” and walk in the other direction.*
  - c. You can also use “Targeting”, see below.
  - d. Be calm, patient and reward all good behaviors.

2. **Defense of territory** is a natural response for a dog, it is their job to warn you that someone or another dog is close and there may be danger. This can be a response from a dominant dog.
3. **Lack of socialization with people** can cause stress for some dogs. Some people are afraid of dogs and the dog can sense that, and others rush to embrace and pet them without asking permission. Your role is to protect your dog and make the introduction calm and at a slow pace. If a dog is afraid of the person approaching, they could react and bite them. This can be a difficult situation if well-meaning strangers keep approaching and asking you to pet your dog.
  - a. You can block the person by standing in front of your dog with your arm out explaining your dog is in training and please do not approach. You can also get a Dog-in-training-vest; you can order these on-line to fit your dog!
  - b. Slowly introduce your dog to a friend. Start by having the person come in your house and ask them to ignore your dog. Let the dog come to your friend when he is ready. Do not stare the dog in the eyes, or stand over the dog (very dominant behavior for dogs). If your dog approaches, ask the person to put her hand down by her side with the palm down. Ask her not to put her hand in the dog's face, instead, let the dog sniff; he may actually lick her hand. When he does, reward and praise him!
  - c. Go slow, be patient and reward the behavior you want.
4. **Lack of socialization with other dogs** can be difficult. Your dog's reaction could be because he is on a leash and restrained while passing another dog (leash frustration), but if the other dog is off-leash running towards him that is much more dangerous. When a dog is off-leash it is that dog's owner who is responsible for any negative interaction. Fortunately, most owners have non-reactive dogs who love meeting people and other dogs. These owners never consider their off-leash dog who is running towards you might be heading for a traumatic experience. Even worse are irresponsible owners who allow their dogs to escape from their yards or out the front door without ever having trained a reliable recall (come when called cue). These dogs may be pent up and aroused or may be looking for a fight.
  - a. The easiest way to get an off-leash dog to stay back is to use your body language and your voice. Most domestic dogs understand a human pointing a finger, so point and lean over and hold out your hand and stomp your foot, stomp forward one or two steps, and in a low, firm voice say BACK-OFF!
  - b. You can also carry a product called [SprayShield](#) which comes in a small can with a clip which you can clip to your belt or fanny-pack. It sprays a highly concentrated stream of citronella oil which is offensive to most dogs. This spray is handy for breaking up dog fights as well. *If the owner of the off-leash dog becomes angry, first explain that it's citronella and doesn't hurt their dog except to make them smell lemony. You can also offer to call 911 for the offending owner since in most cities in America, having a dog off-leash is illegal unless you have a permit!*

In addition, if a fearful dog is on leash, tied to a tree or tie-out, in a fenced yard, or a crate, and they see another dog, or even a person coming toward them the only thing they can do is respond with a big warning! To the restrained dog he is not free to defend himself, and this can cause anxiety, fear, and eventually aggression. The dog may react to scare off the approaching dog or person by barking and growling.

Now that you understand some of the reasons why dogs react, you can start making a plan to help your dog become less reactive to his specific triggers.

## Working on Your Dog's Threshold

First, take note of what your dog is reactive to, his triggers. Most dogs who exhibit this behavior do so in specific circumstances. Your dog's trigger might be the close proximity of other dogs, or only male dogs or only female dogs. Maybe you've noticed that it only happens on leash, or when there are toys, food or other resources around. Maybe your dog overreacts to men with beards or people wearing hats, or sunglasses. Whatever the instance isolate all the situations which your dog reacts to and write them down. This will help you focus on the areas one at a time, and be prepared for his reaction. See the worksheet below.

Once all the situations are recorded, then decide which reaction you want to work on first. Your goal is to slowly increase your dog's threshold. For example, if your dog is nervous and reactive around other dogs, ask a friend who has a dog to help you in the process. Make sure you have the correct leash (a leather leash allows for better handling) and possibly use a head collar (Halti or Gentle Leader) to ensure you have control. Start with both dogs at least 20 - 30 feet apart, then note the reaction to the other dog; list how many feet you are away before your dog reacts; is it at 10 feet, or 12 feet? Are you in your yard or a neutral territory? Is it only when your dog is on a leash? Is the reaction to a certain breed or a specific dog he reacts to on a walk? The more details you have the easier it is to solve the problem.

While working with your dog, do your best to manage his environment so he doesn't engage in the unwanted behavior; do not let him have access to what triggers his reaction. For example, if it is people that triggers a negative response, then as people approach, use your body to block the approaching person and your dog. He should not be off leash outside or left unsupervised at any time; if he is able to engage in the unwanted behavior while you are teaching him a new behavior, it will take a long time to make the necessary changes.

## The Reactive Signals to Look for:

- A long stare and complete focus, ears are forward as he fixates
- Unable to get your dog's attention, he is fixated on the trigger
- Growling, snarling, barking, again is a warning to try and scare off what he is afraid of
- Raised hackles: the most common reasons are fear and aggression. A dog with its hackles lifted from the neck to the tail is often sign of insecurity along with ears pulled back and tail tucked in. Sometimes, dogs may raise their hackles when they are overexcited and aroused rather than fearful. Generally, the meaning of raised hackles is determined by looking at other body language rather than focusing on the hackles alone.
- Frantic movements, such as movement from one paw to the other, like a tap-dance or turning in circles.

### **Calming Signals:**

Calming signals are a reaction, but are much more subtle. The dog is aware of a potential situation and these signals tell us they are trying to calm themselves or other dogs. This is important to note as the dog is still in a clam mindset and the situation has not yet escalated into a reaction; this is a good time to note the threshold!

### Calming signals can look like:

- Blinking faster than normal
- Yawning
- Shaking off
- Stretching

- Sneezing
- Lip licking
- Turning their body away

## Importance of Obedience Training

Since fear stems from a lack of confidence, and obedience training helps dogs gain confidence, it is important to enroll your dog in a basic class; the class will aid in the process of decreasing his threshold to a trigger. If you have just adopted a rescue or older dog, and they are already trained, it is still a good idea to go through the class to reinforce the training and establish yourself as the leader.

Remember to reward the good behaviors, and do not scold or say “No” for any bad or reactive behaviors. You are trying to change the old patterns and teach your dog new ones. It’s important to always be calm, upbeat, praise him when he is not reacting, and tell him what a wonderful dog is and his confidence will build and his reactions will lessen. Dogs mirror our emotions; they will pick up on fear, frustrations, and anxiety, but they also pick up on calm, happy and confidence! If we are happy and calm it is easier for them to stay calm.

### Work obedience training into your daily walks:

- Have your dog “wait” at every door, going in and out. The door does not open until he is behind the threshold you have chosen. Then, say “okay”, to release him to go outside as you exit the door first.
- Teach your dog to “sit” and look at you at every corner before crossing the street.
- During your walks let your dog “go sniff”, but only when you give him the release cue, such as “okay” and then letting him sniff in their favorite spot. The control comes in as you let them go sniff (while on leash), and then call them back to continue the walk (they do not get to tell you where to go), you let them sniff, then say, “Let’s go” as you ask him return to you and continue the walk).
- While on the walk have your dog “sit-stay” while on the leash or long-line, and then increase the areas you practice, and work up to an area that is distracting for your dog (distractions can be people in the distance, squirrels, birds, etc.).

*Note: If your dog is too reactive for a class with other dogs, you can teach him at home until you are more comfortable. We teach obedience in private sessions, or you can see the obedience cues and instructions on the Homeward Bound website under Golden Rule Training.*

## The Plan to Alleviate the Reaction

First identify the trigger(s) you want to work on, below is an example to help you plan your strategy. As with all dog training, make sure your dog is able to succeed easily in the beginning and then gradually present more distractions. Go slow and be patient!

The first step in training is to get your dog’s attention with the “Focus” or “Watch me” cue (*see the Golden Rule Training library for the “focus” cue instructions*). If you know how to use a clicker, you can use a clicker and treats. The click should mark any moment when your dog is in the presence of his trigger, but is not reacting to it. Remember to reinforce positive behavior generously; your dog will eventually understand when he sees his trigger he is calm and he gets a yummy treat!

- Identify the trigger(s) and write down all reactions in detail

- Determine which behaviors you do want instead of the reactive ones (calm behavior when walking by other dogs vs. the lunging and barking)
- Enroll your dog in obedience training to help your dog gain confidence, establish you as the leader and understand basic training skills with or without using a clicker
- Identify reward-able behaviors, using cues and commands
- Do not correct any reactions, it can cause him more stress and escalate the reaction

**Scenario Example:**

Reaction: My dog reacts to other dogs while on leash, he barks and pulls me over towards the other dog. He growls and has nipped other dogs that get too close.

Goal: To have my dog pass another dog while on leash without barking, nipping and pulling

Equipment: A strong leash and a head collar (Halti or Gentle Leader) for added control and safety and plenty of yummy treats for good behavior.

Training steps: *(Break the training plan into small steps so your dog is successful)*

1. First, teach my dog the “focus” or “watch me” cue at home where he feels safe and there are no distractions (proof this in my home until I get 100% response).
2. Teach my dog to “sit” on cue at home with no distractions (in my home).
3. Then ask my dog to “watch me” and then pause and ask him to “sit” at home and he then gets a good treat. Work on this until he looks at you and sits easily.
4. Next practice 1, 2 and 3 in the backyard, then the front yard with some distractions.
5. While on a walk practice these steps by asking my dog to “watch me” when there is no other dogs around (increasing the distraction from home to out in public). Then ask him to “watch me” and “sit” and when he does he gets a yummy treat (has to be high value to him).
6. While on a walk I see a dog in the distance, I ask my dog to “watch me” when he sees another dog. Then I will ask him to “sit” and “watch me” again, and if he does so he gets a yummy treat (the treat has to be high value to him, such as roast beef). Note the distance before a reaction (the dog is 30 feet away, etc.)
7. I will then practice with other dogs on my walks, and as the other dog approaches I will note how many feet before my dog reacts (this is his threshold). As I get closer to the other dog, BEFORE he reacts, I will ask my dog to “watch me”, then “sit”, again noting the distance. If he is reacting and he cannot respond to your cues, then back up and try again. You can always ask a neighbor or friend who has a friendly dog to help so you can practice.
8. I will keep practicing until I can get closer to other dogs little by little. This process can take weeks, and do not push him further than his threshold.
9. I will note how close I can get to another dog, over time I will be able to walk passed another dog with little to no reaction. Every time there is no reaction, I praise and reward him!

## Tool:

**Targeting** is a tool you can use to build confidence in a fearful dog. If a dog has not been exposed to people, other dogs, noises, or unfamiliar objects they may react. The use of a clicker can be used and works well because the sound it makes is consistent and the dog recognizes it instantly. To start with a clicker you have to click and treat (do not say anything, simply use the clicker to mark the behavior) a few times for a few days to prime a response (click is a good thing!). The process can be done without a clicker as well.

1. Start with holding your hand open by your side with the palm facing your dog; because he will be curious, he may come over on his own and touch your palm with his nose.
2. When he does say, "Touch" or you can say nothing and click and treat.
3. You start with a treat in the palm of your hand with your thumb holding it in place. Click or say, "Touch" when your dog bumps his nose to your hand.
4. After six repetitions remove the treat from your palm and repeat, but this time the dog is bumping your hand for the click and the treat is now coming from your pocket.
5. Repeat this until the dog is really enthusiastic, and then start moving your target hand so that your dog must follow it for a step or two in order to touch.

Next, change position, repeat the exercise while in a standing or kneeling position, and then in a different room; finally adding more distraction. When the dog is readily offering the behavior in all different positions, you can add another person to the game. Have the other person sit close to you and you take turns offering your hands for a nose bump, clicking and treating (or saying "touch") at each repetition. Start at the beginning with a treat in the new persons hand for the first couple of times until your dog starts to catch on to the game.

Once he understands it, start moving away from each other so that the dog has to run back and forth between the two of you. Gradually transfer the touch to objects by holding your hand near the new object until he is bumping the object instead of your hand and then start putting distance slowly between you and the object. This tool is invaluable when retraining a dog that is fearful around new people or new objects.

You can make training fun and easy by adding cues to your daily routine. Just like children, learning has to be recalibrated often and consistency is a must. Training your dog does not have to become a chore; for example, when you are taking your dog for a walk, have him "focus" on you and then ask him to sit at every corner before crossing the street. Training should be incorporated daily to ensure your dog does not back slide into old, unwanted behaviors.

## In Closing

Training and working with a reactive dog is not easy, but the reward for you and your dog is well worth the time and effort. Remember to work within your dog's threshold, reward all good and non-reactive behaviors, and never yell or correct for a reaction. Be your dogs advocate by using the right equipment, providing as much training as you can and keep him safe.

At any point if you feel your dog is beyond reactive, that he is truly dangerous or has bitten people or got in fights with other dogs, seek the help of a qualified professional in implementing the appropriate training program for your dogs issues.

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This article is dedicated to Lenny, a very special Golden

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Sources:

<http://companionanimalsolutions.com> by: Christine Hibbard, CTC, CPDT

Steve Benjamin, KPA CTP

# The Anti-Trigger Worksheet

**Reaction:**

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**Goal:**

To have my dog:

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**Equipment:**

A strong leash       Head collar (Halti or Gentle Leader)       A Clicker       Treats (pea size and his/her favorite)       Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Training steps:** *(Break the training plan into small steps so your dog is successful)*

1. First, get my dog to focus on me so I can redirect him when he is reacting. Teach my dog the "focus" or "watch me" cue, and work on this without any distractions so he understands what I want him to do (proof this at home until you get 100% response).
2. Teach my dog to "sit" on cue at home with no distractions in your home.
3. Teach my dog to "watch me" and "sit" outside in the front yard with a little distraction.
4. Then ask my dog to "watch me" and then pause and ask him to "sit" at home and he gets a good treat and praise! Work on this until he looks at you and sits easily.
5. Next (list trigger and break it into small pieces):

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6. I will keep practicing until his threshold is (example: 2 feet away)\_\_\_\_\_

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7. I will note how his threshold each week and note progress:\_\_\_\_\_

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