

Dog Reactivity: Desensitization, CAT and BAT

What do you do when your dog reacts poorly (barks, snarls, lunges, etc.) around other dogs when on leash? It's a common problem which can be resolved or at least managed in many cases but can take a great deal of time and patience.

The method a trainer uses to work on this behavior may depend on what is causing the behavior in the first place. So the first thing a trainer will do is figure out what is going on: is your dog frustrated, because she really wants to sniff or play with the other dog? Is he afraid of the other dog? Does she see the other dog as prey? Is he possessive of or protective over certain people?

Some methods that can be used depending on the cause of the reactivity are: teaching alternative behaviors, desensitization, CAT and BAT. Teaching an alternative behavior simply means having your dog perform a behavior which is incompatible with reacting when it sees another dog. For example, if your dog is walking nicely on leash and focusing on you, or sitting calmly and concentrating on you, it will be distracted from the other dog and it will not react.

Desensitization is a process of slowly getting the dog used to having other dogs around. For example, you would treat and praise your dog when he notices another dog 3 blocks away but doesn't react. Then you would slowly inch closer while rewarding for not reacting. If you go too quickly and your dog reacts, you move backward and start again. If this process is done well, your dog may begin to associate other dogs with treats and praise instead of fear or frustration, looking to you for their chicken when they see another dog rather than reacting.

If your dog is reacting due to fear, CAT and BAT are two newer methods that may work. In CAT, "Constructional Aggression Treatment," rather than treat and praise your dog for not reacting to another dog, you reward your dog for calm behavior by removing the other dog. If you make a mistake and go too quickly and your dog reacts, you wait out your dog until you get some calming signals, at which point you remove the other dog.

BAT, "Behavior Adjustment Training," differs from CAT in that if you make a mistake and your dog reacts, instead of waiting it out and letting your dog react you abort the trial by asking for a different behavior and rewarding it, removing the other dog, or allowing your dog to leave. Also, in BAT the reward for good behavior is sometimes the other dog leaving but is also often allowing your dog to leave the situation, which some trainers feel gives your dog more control.

It's really important to work with an experienced trainer using any of these methods, because the timing of the reward needs to be extremely accurate for them to work. Experienced trainers will notice slight body movements signaling calm, such as head turns or eye blinks, and will be able to provide the reward or distraction at just the right moment.

Many dogs may never be able to go up to and happily greet another dog on leash, but the majority of dogs if worked with carefully enough will eventually be able to go out for a nice neighborhood walk!