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Reducing Your Dog's Leash Reactivity During Daily Walks

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Goals:

- Keep your dog calm and focused on you throughout the walk
- Create positive associations with your dog's typical triggers (instead of "uh oh, here it comes," we want "yippee! here it comes!")
- As much as possible, avoid situations that are likely to put your dog over his comfort threshold

Step 1: Identify your dog's triggers

- What makes your dog lunge, bark, growl or whine on leash? Common triggers include: other dogs (sometimes specific dogs, other times all dogs), people, people wearing heavy coats/hats/hoodies, men, skateboards, bicycles, and children.

Step 2: Motivation

- To keep your dog's attention, you'll need some highly tasty, highly valuable treats. Test out various options to find which ones your dog loves the most. Reserve the most valuable treats to use only on walks - this will make them more salient. Also try mixing up the types of treats you use during the walk to keep things interesting.
- Some dogs love tug toys just as much or more than treats. If you have a dog that is toy motivated, you can also use this in addition to food.

Step 3: Equipment

- Make sure your dog is fitted with a no-pull harness (and has been trained to wear one).
- If your dog has a history of aggression toward dogs and strangers, be sure to train your dog to wear a basket muzzle for safety purposes. (Mutt About Town recommends Baskerville brand muzzles. For more information about muzzles and muzzle training, go to The Muzzle Up! Project at <http://muzzleupproject.com>).



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- Don't forget a treat pouch! You'll need a way to easily access and deliver treats on the walk.
- Use a regular nylon or cotton leash (no flexi-leads). As much as possible, try to keep the leash loose, as a tight leash can cause an increase in reactivity in dogs.

The Plan

- While walking your dog, keep a keen eye on the environment. Scan the sidewalk and surrounding area for potential triggers. Avoid areas where your dog could get "cornered" with an oncoming trigger.
- Once your dog notices a trigger (a dog in a yard, a stranger across the street, etc.), immediately start "happy talking" to your dog and delivering treats. Make sure the treats come *after* your dog notices the trigger. We want the trigger to predict the treats, so that your dog learns that the things he fears actually lead to good things.
- If your dog is too upset to take treats (i.e., if the trigger is too strong or too close), commence the happy talking and turn to create some distance between you and the trigger. Once your dog has some distance between himself and the trigger, proceed with the treats.
- If you know a situation is approaching that your dog will not handle well, turn and go the other way. The goal of the walk is to keep your dog as calm as possible. One of the best tools you have in addition to supplying treats is increasing distance between your dog and the trigger.
- Reinforce calm behavior! If you see your dog do typical walking behaviors (sniffing, loose and relaxed body language, "shaking it off" after stressful situations, or making eye contact with you), immediately reward him. To maintain calm, periodically ask your dog to do a simple behavior like "sit" or "touch," and follow up with a treat. This helps your dog stay focused on you, and the reward for the behavior builds positive associations with the walk and surrounding environment.
- Do not punish the reactive behavior (barking, lunging, growling, etc.). Your dog is doing these behaviors because he is uncomfortable and upset. If you punish these behaviors, we're only working on the symptoms of leash reactivity. The root of the problem is the emotion. By supplying happy talk and treats when your dog encounters things that are scary to him, you are gradually changing the emotion. You will not increase the barking, growling and lunging by doing this. Why? Because once your



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dog no longer fears his triggers, he will no longer do the reactive behaviors.
Remember: You cannot reward fear.

For more information on training, dog behavior and to get in touch with Mutt About Town, go to <http://muttabouttown.com>.