



DOG TRAINING & OBEDIENCE

A gentle, gradual plan for the dog who lunges and barks on walks.

CPC Dog Training

DIGITAL SELF-HELP GUIDE



The Reactive Dog Plan

*A gentle, gradual plan for the dog who lunges
and barks on walks.*

CPC DOG TRAINING

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WELCOME

Before You Begin

If you've started walking your dog at 6am to avoid everyone, or turned around at the sight of a distant dog, or come home from a walk shaking — this book is for you. Reactivity is uniquely exhausting because it's public, it feels like judgement, and it slowly shrinks your life along with your dog's. Two things worth saying before anything else. First: your dog is not being dominant, spiteful or badly behaved. Reactivity is almost always fear or frustration, and it's a feeling problem long before it's an obedience problem. Second: this is workable. Not with force, and not overnight, but with distance, patience and a plan that respects what your dog can actually handle today. This guide gives you that plan — how to find your dog's threshold, build a gradual ladder, handle the walks that ambush you, and recover from the bad days without losing what you've built. Go gently, on both ends of the leash.

— *The CPC Dog Training Team*

Getting the Most From This Book

This is a short book by design — but it isn't a race. The ideas here work best when you let them settle and put them into practice, one at a time. Here's how to get the most from the pages ahead.

1

Read actively.

Every chapter ends with a *Try This* exercise and a set of *Key Takeaways*. The reading plants the idea; the exercise is what makes it yours.

2

Start small.

You don't need to apply everything at once. Choose a single practice, let it become genuinely easy, and only then add another.

3

Keep what works.

Anxiety is personal. Some tools will click for you and others won't — keep the ones that help and quietly leave the rest.

4

Be kind to yourself.

Progress is never a straight line. A hard day isn't a failure or a reset to zero — it's simply part of the path.

Whenever you're ready, turn the page and let's begin.

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What Reactivity Actually Is

Understanding what's happening changes how you respond to it — and stops you using approaches that make it worse.

Reactivity looks like aggression from the outside, but underneath it's usually something quite different.

Fear and frustration, not dominance

Most reactive dogs are afraid. The lunging and barking is distance-increasing behavior: 'go away, please, you're too close'. It works, too — the other dog usually does pass by — which is why it strengthens over time.

A smaller group are frustrated greeters: dogs who desperately want to reach the other dog and explode because the lead prevents it. It looks similar but the emotion is opposite. Either way, this isn't a dog challenging your authority; it's a dog who can't cope with a situation at the distance they're being asked to cope with it.

Your dog isn't giving you a hard time on that walk. Your dog is having a hard time, in public, where everyone can see.

Why punishment makes it worse

Correcting a reactive dog — a leash pop, a shout, a spray — adds something unpleasant to a situation that already feels unpleasant. Your dog's association becomes 'other dogs appear and bad things happen to me', which is precisely the belief driving the behavior.

It can also suppress the warning without touching the fear, producing a dog who stops barking but still feels terrible and may eventually skip straight to a bite. If your goal is a dog who genuinely feels okay about other dogs, everything must work by changing that feeling.

Over threshold means no learning

When a dog goes over threshold, they're flooded with stress hormones. In that state they can't take food, can't hear cues, and can't learn anything except that the situation was as bad as they feared. Every over-threshold episode is a rehearsal that makes the next one more likely.

This single fact drives the entire method. Almost all progress comes from arranging situations where your dog notices the trigger but stays under threshold. That's not avoidance — that's the only condition in which learning is possible.

Try This — Identify the Emotion

Fear and frustration need slightly different handling. Work out which you're dealing with.

1. Watch your dog's body as a trigger appears at a distance.
2. Leaning back, tail lower, trying to retreat, barking that continues after it passes → fear.
3. Leaning forward, tail high, whining, settling quickly once it's gone → frustration.
4. Write which one, plus the three triggers that set your dog off most.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Reactivity is almost always fear or frustration, not dominance or disobedience.
- Punishment confirms that triggers predict bad things, and can remove the warning.
- Over threshold means no learning — every episode rehearses the problem.

Finding the Threshold

Everything in this book happens at one specific distance: close enough that your dog notices the trigger, far enough that they can still think. Finding that distance is the single most important practical skill here.

The food test

The most reliable measure is simple. With a trigger visible, offer a high-value treat. If your dog takes it normally, they're under threshold. If they ignore it, take it roughly, or spit it out, they're over — and you're too close.

Food refusal is objective and it removes the guesswork. Practise it deliberately: approach a trigger area gradually, testing every few metres, and note the distance where eating stops being normal. That's your working line.

The distance where your dog can still eat is the only distance where your dog can still learn.

Read the early signs too

Before the food test fails, you'll usually see a sequence: ears forward, body stiffening, a hard stare, a closed mouth, weight shifting forward.

That's your dog noticing and beginning to escalate — the window in which you still have easy options.

Learn your dog's specific early tell and treat it as an alarm. Once you know it, you can adjust distance before anything visible goes wrong, which is the difference between a productive walk and a blow-up.

Threshold moves

Your dog's threshold isn't a fixed number. It shrinks when they're tired, unwell, already stressed from earlier in the day, or when the trigger is unusually intense — a barking dog rather than a calm one, a running child rather than a still one.

So test rather than assume. Twenty metres might be plenty on a quiet Tuesday and nowhere near enough on a Saturday in the park after a stressful morning. Working with a moving threshold is not inconsistency; it's accuracy.

Try This — Measure Your Distance

One session that gives you the number everything else depends on.

1. Go somewhere you can see triggers at a distance with room to retreat.
2. Start far enough away that your dog is completely comfortable.
3. When a trigger appears, offer a high-value treat and note if they take it normally.
4. Move a few metres closer between triggers, testing each time, until food gets refused — the last successful distance is your threshold.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Food refusal is the objective test for being over threshold.
- Learn your dog's earliest tell — stiffening, hard stare, closed mouth.
- Threshold shrinks with tiredness, illness and accumulated stress, so test every time.

Building the Ladder

With a threshold established, you can start changing how your dog feels. The method is straightforward to describe and requires real patience to run: pair the trigger with something wonderful, at a distance where your dog stays comfortable, over and over.

Trigger predicts chicken

The core exercise: the instant your dog notices the trigger, start feeding excellent food continuously. When the trigger goes out of sight, the food stops immediately. Trigger on, food on. Trigger off, food off.

You're building an association, not rewarding a behavior — so feed regardless of what your dog is doing, as long as they're under threshold. Over many repetitions, the appearance of another dog starts to predict good things, and the underlying emotion begins to shift.

You're not teaching your dog to behave around other dogs. You're teaching them that other dogs are good news.

Watch for the look-back

The milestone to look for is your dog spotting a trigger and then voluntarily turning to look at you — the 'where's my chicken?' response. That's the association taking hold, and it's the behavior that eventually replaces lunging.

When you see it reliably at your current distance, you can close the gap slightly. Reduce distance in small increments and only when the look-back is consistent. If it disappears, you've moved too close; back up without any fuss.

Go slower than feels necessary

The commonest mistake is progressing too fast because a few good sessions felt encouraging. Reactivity work rewards patience more than almost any other training: weeks at one distance is normal and not a sign of failure.

Also protect your training between sessions. If your dog has a terrifying encounter on a normal walk, it can undo weeks of careful work. During this period, choose quiet routes and odd hours deliberately. That's not avoidance forever — it's protecting the work while it's still fragile.

Try This — Run One Pairing Session

Ten minutes at a safe distance, done properly, beats an hour of struggling.

1. Position yourself at your measured threshold distance with excellent food ready.
2. The moment your dog notices a trigger, feed continuously, piece after piece.
3. The moment the trigger leaves view, stop feeding completely.
4. Do this for three or four triggers, then end the session while it's still going well.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Feed continuously while the trigger is visible and stop the instant it's gone.
- The voluntary look-back is your signal the association is forming.
- Progress in small steps, and protect the work with quiet routes between sessions.

Handling the Ambush

Real walks don't cooperate. A dog appears around a corner at five metres, an off-leash dog runs at you, a jogger materialises from behind. This chapter is about the emergency toolkit — and the mindset that keeps a bad moment from becoming a setback.

The emergency u-turn

Your most valuable tool. Teach it with no trigger present: say something cheerful like 'this way!', turn away, and jog a few steps while feeding generously. Practise it dozens of times on ordinary walks until it's automatic for both of you.

Then when you're ambushed, use it instantly and without hesitation. Leaving isn't a failure or an admission of defeat — it's preventing a rehearsal. A dog who blows up gets more practised at blowing up; a dog who leaves early doesn't.

Walking away isn't giving up. It's refusing to let your dog practise the thing you're trying to fix.

Emergency scatter and barriers

If you can't retreat, throw a handful of treats on the ground. Sniffing is calming, it drops the head and breaks the stare, and it keeps your dog occupied while the trigger passes. Practise a scatter cue in advance so it works when it matters.

Use the environment too. Step behind a parked car, a hedge, a wall, or simply turn your dog to face away. Removing line of sight often defuses the whole situation instantly, because most reactivity is driven by watching the trigger approach.

Protect your dog, out loud

You will need to speak up. 'Please don't let your dog approach, mine needs space' is a complete sentence and you don't owe anyone more explanation. If someone with an off-leash dog is closing in, call out early rather than waiting politely while your dog panics.

Consider a bright lead or harness marked 'NEEDS SPACE' or 'NERVOUS'. It won't stop everyone, but it prevents a fair number of well-meaning approaches. Your job here is to be your dog's advocate, and that's worth some social awkwardness.

Try This — Drill the U-Turn

Build the reflex while it's easy, so it's there when it isn't.

1. On an ordinary quiet walk, say 'this way!' cheerfully and turn away.
2. Jog a few steps and feed generously as your dog follows.
3. Repeat five to ten times per walk with no trigger present.
4. Continue until your dog turns instantly on the words alone.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Practise an emergency u-turn until it's automatic, then use it without hesitation.
- A treat scatter or a visual barrier defuses situations you can't retreat from.
- Speak up early — advocating for your dog is part of the job.

Routes, Times and Setups

Reactivity work succeeds or fails mostly on logistics. If your daily walk guarantees three close-range surprises, no training method will hold. This chapter is about engineering walks where success is the default.

Choose the environment deliberately

Map your area honestly: which streets have wide pavements and good sightlines, which have blind corners and narrow paths, where the dog-walking crowd goes and when. Then build your routes from the good parts.

Wide open spaces are usually far better than narrow paths, because distance is available. A quiet industrial estate on a Sunday, a large empty field, or a wide residential street at an odd hour are all excellent training grounds — unglamorous, but they let you control distance, which is everything.

You don't need a braver dog. You need a walk where your dog doesn't have to be brave yet.

Use time as a tool

Walking at 6am or 9pm during the intensive phase is a legitimate strategy, not a defeat. You're buying quiet conditions in which your dog can succeed, which is what builds the tolerance that eventually makes busier times possible.

Separate your walk types explicitly. Decompression walks are about sniffing and enjoyment in quiet places, with no training agenda. Training walks are short, deliberate sessions at threshold. Don't try to do both at once — that's how sessions turn into stressful slogs.

Meet your dog's other needs

A dog whose needs aren't met has a much lower threshold for everything. Sniffing is genuinely calming and mentally tiring — let walks include long, unhurried sniffing rather than route-marching. Add food puzzles, scatter feeding and chewing at home, all of which lower arousal.

Sleep matters more than most owners realise; many dogs need a great deal of rest and become noticeably more reactive when short of it. And if reactivity appeared suddenly or is escalating quickly, see your vet — pain is a common and frequently missed cause of behavior change.

Try This — Map Your Routes

Twenty minutes of planning removes most of the bad surprises from your week.

1. List your usual walking routes and mark blind corners and narrow sections.
2. Identify two routes with wide sightlines and easy escape options.
3. Note the quietest hour you can realistically walk in.
4. Plan the coming week: which walks are decompression, which are training.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Choose routes with wide sightlines and room to create distance.
- Walking at quiet hours is a valid strategy while you build tolerance.
- Meet sniffing, chewing and sleep needs — and see a vet if reactivity appeared suddenly.

After a Bad Day

There will be bad days: an off-leash dog charges you, your dog melts down, someone says something unkind, and you walk home feeling like it was all for nothing. This chapter is about that day — because how you handle it decides whether the setback is temporary or permanent.

One bad walk isn't a relapse

Progress in reactivity work is jagged, never linear. A dog who has improved for a month can have a shocking day, usually because of stacked stress, poor sleep, an unusually intense trigger, or plain bad luck.

That day is a data point, not a verdict. The mistake is concluding the training doesn't work and abandoning it, because the underlying learning is still there — it's just temporarily buried under stress hormones that need time to clear.

***Judge this work in months, not walks.
The walk you're upset about today
will barely register in ninety days.***

The 48-hour reset

After a real blow-up, stress hormones can stay elevated for a day or more, leaving your dog primed to react again. So take the pressure off deliberately: two or three days of quiet, easy activity with no training agenda and no trigger exposure.

Sniffy walks somewhere empty, garden time, chews, puzzle feeders, extra sleep. When you return to training, drop back a level — more distance than before — and rebuild. That step back is not lost ground; it's how you avoid a second bad episode.

Be kind to yourself, and get help

Living with a reactive dog is genuinely hard. The embarrassment, the isolation, the comments from strangers, the grief for the easy dog you imagined — all of that is real and widely felt, even if nobody talks about it. You are not failing because your dog barks at other dogs.

Measure progress in months, not walks: better recovery time, more distance tolerated, fewer full meltdowns. And please consider working with a certified, force-free behaviorist in person — reactivity is one of the areas where individual guidance helps most, and it's essential if there's any bite history, if it's worsening, or if you feel out of your depth. Asking for help is the strong move, not the last resort.

Try This — Write Your Reset Plan

Decide now what a bad day looks like, so you're not making choices while upset.

1. Write: 'After a blow-up, we take __ days off training.' (Two or three is typical.)
2. List three low-stress activities for those days — sniffy walk, chew, puzzle feeder.
3. Write the distance you'll restart at, further than your current threshold.
4. Add one line reminding yourself that a bad walk is a data point, not a verdict.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Progress is jagged — one bad walk is a data point, not a relapse.
- Take two or three low-pressure days after a blow-up, then restart at a greater distance.
- Measure progress in months, and get in-person professional help for bite history or worsening fear.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Your Action Plan

Your plan on one page. Go slower than you think you need to — with reactivity, patience genuinely is the technique.

- ☐ Identify whether your dog's reactivity is fear or frustration.
- ☐ List your dog's top three triggers.
- ☐ Measure threshold distance using the food-refusal test.
- ☐ Learn your dog's earliest tell and treat it as an alarm.
- ☐ Re-test threshold every session — it moves with stress and tiredness.
- ☐ Run pairing sessions: trigger visible = continuous food, trigger gone = food stops.
- ☐ Watch for the voluntary look-back before reducing distance.
- ☐ Reduce distance in small increments, and back off without fuss if it slips.
- ☐ Drill the emergency u-turn on ordinary walks until it's automatic.
- ☐ Practise a treat-scatter cue and use visual barriers when you can't retreat.
- ☐ Say 'my dog needs space' early and without apology.
- ☐ Map two wide-sightline routes and identify your quietest walking hour.
- ☐ Separate decompression walks from training walks.

- ☐ Meet sniffing, chewing and sleep needs to raise the baseline threshold.
- ☐ Take two or three quiet days after any blow-up, then restart further away.
- ☐ See a vet if reactivity appeared suddenly — pain is a common hidden cause.
- ☐ Work with a certified force-free behaviorist, especially with any bite history.

FINAL WORDS

Where You Go From Here

Reactivity work asks for more patience than any other kind of dog training, and it gives back more than most people expect. You won't get a dog who adores every other dog on the street — that was never the goal. What you can absolutely get is a dog who notices a trigger and looks to you, who recovers in seconds instead of minutes, and who can walk down a normal street on a normal afternoon without either of you dreading it. Start with the threshold measurement and the u-turn drill this week; they're small, they're concrete, and everything else is built on them. Be generous with distance, be quick to leave, and be kind to yourself on the days it goes badly. You're not managing a difficult dog. You're helping a frightened one learn that the world is safer than they thought — and there are few better things you can do for an animal who depends on you.

Breathe. Begin. Return.

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