

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

TEACHING REACTIVE DOGS A NEW HABIT: PART I “OPEN BAR”

Nancy M. Kelly



- Is your dog reactive to exciting stimuli? Does she bark and lunge at kids on skateboards, people on bikes, or other dogs? Do any of the following descriptions apply?
- Your dog is great at home, but barks at people when you take him out in public.
- Your dog is fine outside with you while you work in the yard, but forget it if a bicycle goes by!
- Your dog walks great on a leash, unless someone else with a dog comes along.

None of this means that your dog is a bad dog, but she does need to learn a different behavior to perform when stimulated by one of these events. We can change her behavior by changing our own behavior when confronted with the stimulus that can cause our pleasant pooch to turn into a raving maniac. We can use the “Open Bar” technique to desensitize and counter-condition a dog’s response when he’s developed a habit of barking and lunging. The idea behind “Open Bar” is that when your dog sees a dog, bicycle or skateboard nearby, something that can elicit barking and lunging, he gets lots of treats — and he gets them before he reacts, but after he notices the stimulus. In other words, when the cue to react (the trigger, or stimulus that currently gets him upset and reactive) is present, the treat bar is open. Once the cue to react is gone, the bar closes and you are nonchalant, not paying much attention to the dog. Hence, your dog learns to notice a cue to react and look to you for good things and guidance, remaining calm; this behavior replaces the previous behavior of barking and lunging. It’s essential for you to be aware of the cue to react before your dog is, so that you are prepared to train. When you go for a walk, be prepared with a bag of fabulous food treats — treats your dog will do anything to get — broken into bite-size pieces.

Here’s what you’ll do: Stroll along with Rufus. When you see Mr. Smith and Fido turn the corner and approach you on the other side of the street, reach into your treat bag, grab a handful of roasted chicken bits, happily say, “Rufus, Look at that dog! It’s your lucky day!” and begin feeding Rufus one treat at a time as fast as you can. Pay full attention to Rufus until the dog passes by, praising and feeding him while you continue to walk. Focus completely on Rufus. He’ll be focused on you, his mind happily on scarfing down treats. Ignore Mr. Smith! You can’t

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

take time to chat right now because you're training your dog. You can explain later. Once Mr. Smith and Fido have passed, and you've put enough distance between yourself and the cue to react, stop feeding Rufus and go back to walking nonchalantly. You and Rufus know what enough distance needs to be: "enough distance" means how far Rufus has to be from the distraction before he becomes calm again.

The onus is on you to notice the dog before Rufus does. You can't wait until he is already amped-up before opening the bar. A dog who is in the midst of reacting isn't open to learning a new behavior. If he starts barking and lunging, abort! Your best bet is to get out of there; turn around and leave. If your dog is smaller, you can pick him up and carry him away, reminding yourself to pay closer attention next time. Remember that every time your dog practices barking and lunging, he gets better at it, and the habit becomes more ingrained. You'd rather he practice the behavior of looking to you for super- awesome treats when he sees another dog, and with practice, he will.