

2-Minute Trainer: Reactive Dog Recipe



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2-Minute Trainer: The Reactive Dog Recipe



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2-Minute Trainer #5

Reactive Dog Recipe

A different 2-Minute-Trainer Guide

This 2-Minute-Trainer guide is very different from the others. The Reactive Dog Recipe will (hopefully) not apply to every dog. But for the dogs it does apply to, this Recipe is priceless. It is impossible to put a price on the peace of mind formerly reactive dog owners will gain when they successfully complete this process. To turn a lunging, snarling, snapping, biting dog into one who can calmly and even happily coexist with the rest of the family is worth any amount of money.

This guide is very personal to Fran. She's the "I" speaking throughout this guide. Fran learned through mostly trial and error the very positive methods she used to train her own reactive dog. You can read more extensively about Fran's training journey in her book [Tango: Transforming My Hellhound](#).

I turned around my reactive dog and you can too.

What makes a dog reactive? Lack of socialization? The dog was ill when it was a puppy? It spent too much time in a crate? It was a singleton puppy? It was taken from its mother at too young an age? It's shy? It's small? It's scared?

It doesn't matter. If you have a reactive dog, you want to change the behavior. It doesn't matter how it started or what caused it. You're left with the consequences: a reactive dog. One who snaps and lunges at other dogs or people. Whether your dog starts reacting in the crate, on lead, or being held, it's not acceptable and you want to change that behavior.

I discovered that my Brussels Griffon, Tango, was reactive just a couple of days after I got him at 11 months old. He snapped and lunged at other people and dogs from my lap, from his crate, and on lead. He snarled and tried to bite anyone who came close. He took exception to anyone walking near his crate. Even though he only weighed about 10 pounds and most people thought it was funny, I didn't like it and made it my mission to change it.

I wanted to be able to take Tango anywhere. I couldn't do that with a dog that would bark and lunge at anything going past him. I wanted to go to Obedience class, I wanted to take Agility classes with him and ultimately compete. I just wanted to walk around my neighborhood on a nice day. To do any of that, I knew that I had to change his reactivity.

I couldn't take Tango outside anywhere, because he was so unpredictable. I didn't know when he would find someone objectionable and decide to lunge at them. I couldn't take the chance that he would get away from me and bite someone.



Crating area at an agility trial. Try walking through that with a reactive dog...

I'll share my recipe

I'm going to share my recipe for turning around a reactive dog. I changed Tango. He was once a hostile little beast who would act aggressively to anyone, except me. He even bit my sister when she tried to feed him. During one Agility class early on, he was hanging by his teeth to the assistant instructor's pocket. I turned him around using completely positive methods. Now I can take Tango anywhere. We competed through the Master level in Agility and in Rally. I can walk through a crowded stadium, I can walk past people on the sidewalk. Now he's the silly boy sitting on the kitchen chair with his leg hanging off (picture on the cover).

I take road trips with Tango, stopping at rest stops to walk him. I'm able to walk through hotel lobbies with him. I even flew in an airplane with him, and walked through crowded airport terminals. We waited with me in the gate area, along with the rest of the passengers for the flight. He was in a carrier during the flight with people very close to him, but he was quite calm during the entire experience.

We still regularly take group classes with other people and dogs around.

Many cups of P, generous amounts of C, and dollops of 3 D's

How did I do it? It's a simple recipe, but it's not a fast one. You're not going to turn a reactive dog around overnight. But if you want a solution - a real solution that works and lasts, follow this recipe.

P = Patience

First, Last, Always

The P actually comes first. And last. And every day in between.

Patience.

Rome wasn't built in a day, and your reactive dog is not going to change in a day. Give yourself and your dog some time. Get him used to the idea that he doesn't have to stand up for himself or for you. You (the person) can be in charge. He'll probably like it better, but he needs time to get used to that idea.

Part of Tango's issue was that he thought he was protecting me, the house, the car, his crate, and on and on. When the idea finally penetrated that I didn't need his help, he looked to me when something didn't look sufficiently safe for him. But getting that idea across to him took time. So be patient.

You love your dog, even if he can be a jerk sometimes, right? No matter what he does, when he looks at you with those big brown eyes, you melt. When he seems to be smiling at you, you can't resist and give him another treat.

If you love your dog, give him (and you) the patience that this process needs.

And no matter how much of a jerk he's being, smile at him. Smile at the world. It will turn your voice from angry and frustrated to happy and excited to be near your dog.

But, no matter how much you love your dog, sometimes he will still be a jerk. It's only natural that you'll get frustrated and angry at him. If you've practiced an exercise 10 times and he still reacts to the exact thing you've practiced 10 minutes before, it's completely natural to want to yell and scream and throw things.

Take a break. You both need it.

Love = Crate

Using a crate has fallen out of favor with some, but it could save your dog and your sanity. We've always used crates for our dogs. When we say, "Kennel up!" our dogs run into their crates. We bring crates to our group classes and set them up outside the ring. In between exercises our dogs get to relax and decompress in their crates. At trials and shows crates are essential. Dogs are crated during the judges' briefings, and while competitors walk and review the courses.



Simon, Torque and Tango
in some crates at home.

door open. (A benefit of hand-feeding your dog is that it will strengthen the bond you have with him.) Let your dog spend some time alone in the crate - give him a Kong or other fillable toy, stuffed with frozen plain yogurt or plain peanut butter (making sure it does not contain xylitol). Leave the room for fifteen minutes after you give him the toy. He'll have finished it in about 10 minutes, so he'll have at least 5 minutes of calm alone time.

And when you're frustrated with your dog, you can put him in his crate without guilt. You shouldn't feel guilty at all about putting your dog in his crate - because it will become a favorite place for him. With your dog in his crate, you both have the opportunity to decompress and get calm.

D = Distance

Dogs are relatives of wolves who are den animals - and their common ancestor also lived in dens. Dogs love their small, quiet, dark places for calm. A crate should be that calming place for your dog. If your dog isn't used to being in a crate, you can introduce it gradually. Have the crate somewhere you both see frequently. Don't put it in the basement, unless you live in the basement. The kitchen may be a good place for now, if you're in there a lot. Toss some treats in and let your dog get them without closing the door. Your dog may think, "OK - this is weird, but I like the treats" and go inside the crate for them.

Feed your dog in the crate - and close the door. Hand feed your dog when he's in the crate and you're sitting outside it -



Hand-feeding your dog in his
crate both: improves the bond
you have with him AND helps him
get to love the crate.

Your goal is for your reactive dog to become less reactive. The first active exercise to practice in this quest is Distance. Distance is your friend. What may be a trigger for your dog's reactivity at 4 feet is not at 15 feet. Close-up, your dog may perceive another person as threatening. Further away, that person is not a threat. Same thing with other dogs. Or cars. Or buses.

So back up. Look at the world from right outside your door. Let your dog get used to it. Tomorrow is time enough to move closer to everything that's in it. Spend some time looking at things from a distance. Your dog doesn't have to experience anything close up yet.

Be aware

In order to keep a distance from your dog's triggers, you must be aware of everything around you.

Your dog will be aware of everything, so it's up to you to be even more aware of things in the distance but coming closer. When I was training Tango to be less reactive, I was always scanning my surroundings - near and far. Tango had the "near" covered, for sure, but there was always the possibility that someone would come out of a doorway I didn't see. And when I saw someone walking toward us from a distance, I had the chance to plan my next move.

I can't emphasize this enough. When you're with your reactive dog, you must ALWAYS scan your surroundings for his triggers. When your dog sees them inside his reaction zone, it's already too late for you to do anything.

Move away

If I saw one of Tango's triggers, I could move further away or turn away from the trigger. Just the act of walking away could distract Tango enough so that he would stop looking for one of his triggers.

Reactive dogs actively look for a reaction trigger. Dogs get value from barking and snapping. They usually get a reaction from their target for that behavior. If we can head the dog off before they start their reactive behavior, that's a win for us.

Or I could get Tango's attention and practice a distraction training exercise that I'll outline in the next section.

D = Distraction

You have a couple of choices for distraction exercises..



Tango practicing "Cute dog!" By looking at me, he's going to get a treat.

1: "Cute Dog!"

"Who's that cute dog!" That's what I keep telling Tango, and he keeps looking at me, not at what was a trigger for his reactivity. This game started out slowly, and with distance, as in the previous section.

You can use whatever phrase you like. I'd recommend that it be something non-threatening. Many people use the phrase "Watch me" but to me that implies that your dog may be aggressive and people will react negatively to that phrase. When I was training Tango, I wanted people to see a cute little dog, so just went with that.

Standing at a distance from everything gets pretty boring for a little dog, so Tango looked at me. When he did, I said, "Cute dog!" and gave him a treat - or two. The first few times I

reinforced "Cute dog!" with a few treats Tango thought that was the best ever and kept looking at me. I reinforced again. Tango looked away and the game started over again. He got bored, looked at me, I said, "Cute dog!" and gave him a couple of treats.

As the distance to Tango's triggers shortened, the command "Cute dog!" strengthened. Don't be in a hurry for either. This will happen naturally with your dog too.

Eventually, the words "Cute dog!" will become a command. When you say it, your dog will look at you. Praise and treat! And don't be stingy with either the praise or the treat. This is hard stuff, really difficult for your reactive dog. Your dog is going against his instinct. When he looks at you rather than the trigger, it's a definite win for both of you.

2: Movement

Another distraction exercise is to add movement. Move in a direction that's not toward your dog's trigger, preferably away from it. If it's not possible to move in the opposite direction, at least don't let your dog face the trigger.

Talk to your dog while you move - hold his attention. If your dog likes toys, certainly let him hold a toy. If he's holding a toy he can't be snapping and snarling. And no one will be scared of a dog walking and holding a toy.

You can even combine movement and your “Cute dog!” command. Walk while you’re telling your dog he’s adorable. He’ll be looking at you and not around him, looking for trouble.

D = Duplication

Over and over

You will see improvement almost immediately. Don’t be fooled. Your dog’s reactive instinct is still there. Practice your distance exercises every day for short periods of time, several times a day. If you can’t do this a couple times a day, that’s natural. We have lives. Do it when you can. Combine your distance exercises with your “Cute dog!” command and motion exercises. Remember to always scan your surroundings. Don’t let your dog see a trigger and react to it before you see it. Yes, your dog is cute. Use your peripheral vision to see what he’s doing. It’s more important that you scan your surroundings than gaze into your dog’s eyes.

Don’t be in a rush to say that your dog is no longer reactive. Yes, that’s the goal but it’s better to take extra time and be sure than to backslide.



There are lots of distractions in parking lots. And you're able to work at a distance.

Take it on the road

Practice your distance and distraction exercises in as many places as you can. Dogs don’t generalize. Because your dog is successful outside your house does not mean that he can be successful at the hardware store or the public tennis courts. Start in the parking lot at different places. Park away from all the other cars at first if you can. Let your dog watch the far-away motion. When you see that he’s not reacting negatively, move a little closer and practice your “Cute dog!” command.

When you’re successful in the parking lot, go inside if you and your dog are allowed to do so. Sit

at the far end of an aisle and practice your exercises. When you’re successful there, you can move a little closer. Try walking down an aisle.

Always watch your dog for signs of nervousness. At the first sign, make sure he’s under control and go home. Tomorrow’s another day.

Again, don't be in a hurry. This process takes time. For some dogs, a lot of time.

C = Consistency

All dog training requires consistency. You, doing the same thing every time you want the same result.

Reactive dogs require even more consistency. The same tone of voice, the same words, the same hand gestures, the same body position. Sometimes even the same shoes. Yes, even your shoes can make a difference. If you live in a place where you wear sandals in the summer, boots in the winter and sneakers the rest of the time, you'll have to make sure you practice with varying footwear. Jeans, slacks, skirts can make a difference too. Practice your training wearing different clothes. Guys - skirts may not be a good look for you...

And don't be surprised if your dog acts differently if you use different treats. Different treats have different value to a dog. When you're starting out with your reactive dog, use a treat that really makes him notice. Don't use his kibble.

Reactive at home

If your dog is reactive at home to people who come to visit, it's best to tackle that as soon as possible. Of course, putting your reactive dog in his crate when a service person comes may be best for everyone - you can pay attention to the work that needs to be done rather than to your dog. But you may not want to do that when friends and relatives come over.



Tango's brother Booker demonstrating "Place."

Teach "Place"

Teaching any dog their "Place" is a great way to avoid the initial jumping-up excitement when someone comes into your home. And it's also great for your reactive dog to stay out of the way.

Start in the house with your dog's leash and collar on, and step on the leash, giving your dog about 3 feet of slack. Place a bath mat, carpet remnant or dog bed, with the cushion removed if possible, a couple of feet away from you, on the floor. Have a handful of treats ready. Don't say anything.

When your dog moves toward the mat out of curiosity, toss a treat onto it so that your dog will step on it. Toss another treat onto the mat, right under your dog's nose. Praise him but don't give a command. If your dog is still on the mat, toss

another treat onto it. When your dog moves off the mat, don't say anything. Chances are he'll want to stay on the mat, though. Toss another treat on the mat.

If your dog is having no part of the mat, move closer to it. Feed him a treat when he looks at the mat. Don't lure him - don't put the treat in front of his face and move the treat so that he's looking at the mat. It's got to be his idea to look at it. Move closer and reward for a look. He might get on the mat now. If he does, big reward on the mat (not directly in his mouth) - one treat at a time.

If your dog is staying on the mat, you'll still want to practice this again. So, toss a treat a couple feet off the mat saying "Find it!" or something like that. Your dog will scramble for the treat. But he'll probably want to go back on the mat. If he does, toss three more treats on the mat, one at a time. And then "Find it!" off the mat.

And again - a total of three times.

If your dog is going to the mat eagerly, start waiting for him to sit on it before rewarding. When he does sit, give a couple of treats on the mat. Then "Find it!" for a treat. He should go back to the mat right away. If he does, wait for a sit again. And reward. Then "Find it!" And again.

Don't be in a hurry or rush this. You want your dog racing to the mat eagerly every time. And don't be stingy with the rewards. Your dog needs a reason to go to the mat. At this point, it's not going to be just love for you.

Next is waiting for your dog to lie down on the mat. When company comes over, you want your dog to be relaxed and "off-duty." A great place for that is on his mat or in his bed at your side when you're sitting on the couch. Repeat the steps above and wait for your dog to lie down. He'll look at you funny when he's sitting on the mat - "Hey! I'm sitting here! Why aren't you giving me treats?!" Just wait. He'll try something different. When he lies down, five treats right between his paws - one at a time, rapid-fire, and say "Yes! Good (dog's name)!" Then "Find it!" When he goes back on the mat, wait for him to lie down again. And five treats, rapid-fire, right between his paws again.

You can, and we recommend that you do, certainly practice up to this point for a few days before going further. Take it slow and easy. The behavior will be more solid if you don't rush the process.

Add a name to it

When your dog starts racing for the mat and lies down on it you can start adding a command to it. I use "Go mat!" but of course you can use whatever you like. When your dog gets on the mat, say, "Good go mat!" and put a couple of treats under your dog's nose. And then "Find it!"

Do this a few times. Then move away a couple more feet. Your dog is still wearing his leash and collar. Repeat a few (dozen) more times. When your dog is successful in this quiet environment, add more distance.



Blowing leaves are good distractions.



Squirrels are distractions.

Add more distractions

Ask a family member who your dog is familiar with to come into the room and just stand in the doorway.

Ask your dog to “Go mat!” If he does, lots of rewards! If he’s a little slow, just wait. You’ve (hopefully) built up enough value in his going to the mat that he’ll want to be on it. If he’s still not getting it, go back a step or two. Ask the family member to leave the room and play the game by yourselves.

And start again with the family member.

When your dog is successful, add more distractions. Reward your dog for staying on the mat every few seconds at first. Add more people and then more sounds. Then add motion. People moving around. Your dog should stay on the mat.

Add mats around the house

It’s a good idea to have a few of your dog’s mats in different rooms of your house. The living room, the kitchen, the family room. Make sure that your dog is comfortable wherever you are in the house.

Add the doorbell



Practice "Place" with a friend at the doorbell.

Now you're going to want to add the sound of the doorbell. You can enlist a family member or you can use an app for your smartphone that has doorbell sounds similar to yours. When the real or simulated doorbell rings, immediately tell your dog to "Go mat!" If your dog has experience in barking and racing for the door when the doorbell rings, this is going to take some work on your part. Start from the beginning.

Doorbell. "Go mat!" Dog looks at mat. Reward.

Doorbell. "Go mat!" Dog goes to mat. Reward.

Doorbell. "Go mat!" Dog sits on mat. Reward.

Doorbell. "Go mat!" Dog lies down on mat. Reward. And repeat. Several times.

After a few practices of consistent success with this, move to the door when the doorbell rings. You'll want to practice this for a couple of days before you go further.

Then ask a very good friend who knows you and the dog to visit and practice. Set a specific time so that you can set up the scenario. Make

sure your dog's collar and leash are on. When the doorbell rings, tell your dog to "Go mat!" Chances are, though, that when your friend comes through the door, your dog will not stay on the mat. Don't yell. Turn your back on the dog until he settles down. Calmly tell him "Go mat!" And reward him for getting on it. You'll probably have to practice this scenario a few times.

Having your dog get on the mat when you come in the door yourself will help him relax even when others come to visit.

It's helpful to have a few containers of treats around the house to reward your dog when he does something good!

A "P," 2 "D's" and a "C"

Yup - you'll notice the recipe applies in the house too. Patience - because it's not easy. And some days are definitely better than others.

Distance - this time start close and add distance.

Duplication - practice again and again until it's second nature for both of you.

Consistency - do it the same way every time. Say it the same way every time.

It's worth it

The process of turning around a reactive dog takes time. Your dog will be with you for years. Don't rush the process. You'll see progress most days. You'll see more progress on some days than others. Some days you'll think you haven't gotten anywhere. Take heart and know that your consistent practice is sinking in. Your dog may have good days and not-so-good days, just like you. You may be more frustrated some days. It's natural.

And chances are you won't notice the day that your dog isn't reactive any longer. You'll just be practicing your "Cute dog!" command and walking through a crowded stadium with your dog, watching everything around you and making sure that none of your dog's triggers gets close enough to set him off. When you reach your destination, you'll realize that it was a practically pleasant experience. There will be more of them.

And at home when the doorbell rings, your dog races to the closest mat, lies down and looks at you. You answer the door, accept the package from the delivery person, close the door and give your dog a treat. Say, "Yes! Good boy!" and "Find it!" and toss a treat for him. What a good dog!



Tango racing through the weave poles, competing in Agility.