

## A Reactive Dog Owner Doing Her Best

I want to preface by clearly stating that every dog deserves to have freedom and enjoy their life, including reactive/aggressive dogs. I have a dog named Mariah who is reactive, and does not like new people or dogs in her space. Two years ago she, along with our four other dogs at the time, were enjoying an off leash romp in the woods when a group of coyotes separated her from the rest of our crew. Mariah ended up going missing for about 24 hours. Many people came out to look for her in the area she went missing, and a few people actually saw her. However, she was in fight or flight mode, running terrified of everyone and everything, including us... her humans. Eventually, when almost everyone went home and things quieted down we were able to convince her that we were family and it was safe for her to come to us and go home.

Before this incident Mariah was a little reactive to over the top dogs or people startling her, but was overall friendly and easy to manage if she was introduced properly. Since the coyote incident, she does not trust strangers or new dogs nearly as easily and has increased reactivity. We have been working very hard to help her with these issues and have made a lot of progress by ensuring she has as many positive experiences as possible with both people and dogs. However, we also take a lot of precautions with her; when we are in public we give others plenty of space, she wears a harness that clearly states she is not friendly, and is almost always muzzled. To some, these precautions are perceived as “cruel”. I have received MANY dirty looks and nasty comments over her gear, but what some people don’t understand is that this gear allows her to exist safely in the world and enjoy the freedom every dog deserves. Not every dog requires the same tools or training, but for her this is what works and we have gone through a lot of trial and error figuring that out. As an outsider, Mariah appears very friendly and cute (which she is), but she still has her struggles, even if those issues aren’t always as obvious.

As a reactive dog owner, as well as a professional dog trainer with an extensive list of training and experience, there are a few things I believe every human, and especially dog owner should know. The first is to reserve judgment of dog owners who use different tools or training techniques that may be foreign to you. It is important to keep in mind that many owners have spent hours upon hours figuring out what works best for their own pet, and that you are only seeing a snapshot into what has been an incredibly long and arduous process for them. Both in my professional work, as well as with my own pets, I use a wide variety of tools and techniques depending on each animal's needs. For example, what works with my lab almost never works with my heeler mixes, which makes a lot of sense based on the nature of their breeds. Many dogs will learn off leash control through the use of food rewards, toys, clickers etc. However, these techniques may not work for every pet, and that’s when I may use

ecollars, prongs, etc. Whatever method I use is with the ultimate goal of achieving optimal safety and well being for every dog I come in contact with.

The second thing I ask every dog owner to consider deeply is that every single dog is magnificently different, and that you do not know the struggles they or their owners may be working through. Owners with sociable dogs can go out without ever having to think about their dog being blamed for defending themselves. These pets enjoy the benefit of a life full of freedom and friends, which is amazing, but should never come at the expense of other animals' freedom. Unfortunately, many pets are put down each year for having bite records. Under very certain circumstances, this is the best course of action, and I do understand and recognize that that is the case when an animal has been proven without a doubt to be a danger to society despite every effort to modify the aggressive behavior. However, there are many amazing owners who put in a lot of time and effort to train their pets, and still have to live in constant fear of having their dog taken away from them forever because they snapped on an adult, child, or pet that invaded their space despite all the precautions taken on a daily basis. I ask that no matter how friendly your pet is, no matter how much your kid loves dogs, or however great you think you are with dogs, that you think twice before approaching every dog you come across.

Lastly, I will always be an advocate for every dog's freedom and safety in public settings. With Mariah, there are very few situations where I let her off leash due to the risk of running into other people or pets. She has an amazing recall and will not leave my side in pursuit of causing issues, but that does not eliminate the fear of taking her out in public. Unfortunately there are many instances where reactive dog owners make a lot of progress, but are brought three steps back after one poor experience in public. This ranges from friendly pedestrians with the best of intentions running up and sticking a hand in their face despite whatever markers (muzzle/don't touch harness) are being used to state they aren't friendly; to people allowing their dogs to drag them over to her; to off leash dogs running full speed towards her with their owner trailing behind yelling "don't worry, he's friendly! He just wants to say hi!". All of these situations can end in dogs like mine looking terrible even though every step to avoid a bad situation on our part has been made. The fear of encountering any of these people or irresponsible owners often keeps reactive dog owners from going out as often as they would like, which just is not fair.

There are three basic rules that I urge every person, especially pet owners to abide by:

1. No one should assume the right to touch and meet every dog they see. Observe the dog and look for obvious signals of wanting distance, as well as always asking permission.

2. If you can't recall your dog, don't take it off leash. Your dog may be friendly, but it is for the safety of all dogs that you have control over them if you encounter a dog that is not.
3. If you don't have the strength to control your dog on leash when it sees distractions, you're not ready to walk around those distractions.

Sincerely,

A Reactive Dog Owner, Doing My Best