



## Reactivity in young dogs (< 9 months)

Most reactivity starts sometime before the second birthday. There are of course some cases in which dogs become reactive later in life, for example because they were attacked or had an unusual lack of social interaction. During the pandemic for example, I worked with quite a few students whose adult dogs were unable to see other humans or dogs for many months, and started to develop reactivity as a reaction.

However - apart from these circumstances, we can generally say that we see reactivity occur in the first two years of a dog's life.

Among those dogs are the ones who start to be reactive very early, before 8 or 9 months of age. Some dogs already show reactive responses as early as at 5 or 6 months old. The dog in our class, Brodie, actually first started being reactive at 6 months.

And these dogs need an especially careful and well-planned approach.

Unfortunately, if reactivity starts this early and is not addressed, it usually becomes quite difficult to resolve later on in a dog's life. So if you own a young dog that is already reactive, I really want to encourage you to work very diligently and consistently on this. Do not put it off - the later you start, the harder it will be.

In the first year of life, a dog forms his general opinion about the world. While we of course can teach adult dogs many things and change their conditioned emotional responses, a young dog develops sort of a frame work of how he sees the world around him.

Ideally he sees the world as a happy, inviting, kind and friendly place. But, when reactivity starts early on, there is the danger the dog will generalize it and eventually see most things in the world as scary, stressful and aggravating.

That means that it can be that he starts to react negatively even to things that didn't used to be his triggers - simply because the whole word makes a bad impression on him.

So, a young dog that is reactive to for example only large black dogs, could easily progress to the point where he shows reactive behavior towards any other dog - no matter the size or breed.

It also seems more common in young dogs that reactivity towards dogs get generalized towards humans, and vice versa.



In adult dogs, we usually have reactivity towards other dogs as a behavior that's completely separate from reactivity towards people. These grown-up dogs can hate other dogs, but love people for example.

Whereas very young dogs can quickly go from reacting towards other dogs, to also reacting towards people (again, this is because they learn "the whole world is just kinda bad")

But the good news is that if you work consistently with a young reactive dog, you can usually make faster progress than with an adult dog whose reactivity has been ingrained for a long time. This is because your dog simply has not yet been alive long enough to really rehearse the reactivity for months or years - that's a big plus.

So you see - reactivity in young dogs can go either way. If ignored and not addressed consistently, it can lead to really reactive adult dogs.

On the other hand, if you DO take care to have a lot of calm, planned, positive exposure, you will be able to shift your dog's mind set - often much faster than if he was an adult dog with years of reactivity experience.