

Understanding and Preventing Reactivity and Aggression in Your Dog

Speaker Key

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Transcript

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SG Hey, everybody. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I am Susan Garrett, and today we are going to tackle the topic of reactivity and aggression in your dogs. And I want to preface this by saying. This is a serious, serious issue. And if you have a challenge with your dog, I strongly advise that you seek out the help of a certified veterinarian behaviorist. One that is equipped to deal with problems like this in a reinforcement-based program. And one, where needed, will use pharmaceutical intervention to help create a different reality for your dog so that your dog doesn't go through life feeling that they need to react. Create a better reality through pharmaceutical, better living through pharmaceuticals, and then eventually you'll be able to wean off of that, but that kind of strategy will come to you from a professional.

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So today I'm... for the rest of you, I'm going to share how “*different*” has led to aggression for some dogs and how a lot of aggression really is learned. It isn't that there's something wrong with the dog. Now, there are some dogs just like there are some psychopath people that their brain just doesn't work quite right. There are a very few dogs, a small percentage of dogs who are aggressive or reactive because of a serious problem with the brain. But for the rest of those dogs, today I'm going to give you some insight into how it happens. And I'm going to share with you a couple strategies that you can use to help your dog and you have better outcomes.

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Okay. So, let's just, I'm going to talk a little bit of science first, the word stimulus. It's, it's a thing. Stimulus is an event or a thing that creates a behavioral response in your dog. Your dog has got a checklist that rolls through his brain that he doesn't even think about of stimuli that are good that he says, “Oh yeah, I love that, yeah.” So, it could be, it could be treats. It could be activities that he loves. It could be people he loves, it could be places he goes. So, there are things that create like a stimulus that creates the thought that, “Oh, I love that.”

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There are things that are innocuous. Like, you know what, that's pavement, that's another house. Like those are innocuous. I notice them, but I don't really notice them. They're just, you know, white noise to him. And there's things, things he loves, things that are innocuous to him, things that he hates and things that he's afraid of. Now he has his running catalog, in his computer, in his brain and all of those are created through experiences that he's had in his lifetime up until this point. Okay. Now, what happens when we come upon something that is different? Something that the computer doesn't have an output for, for that dog. Different could be maybe a combination of senses. So different could be something that the dog sees.

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So, like the sight of a tennis ball creates excitement for a dog, but they don't come out of the womb going, “Oh, tennis ball. I love them.” Although with some Labrador Retrievers, you might think so. Tennis balls are something that experiences, and rehearsals of those experiences have created ‘I love tennis balls.’



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So, the sight of a tennis ball creates one response, but the sight of say nail clippers for some dogs, creates a different thought because of the experiences attached them, the same with sounds. So, the sound of car keys for dogs who love to go for a car ride, the sound of car keys may mean something completely different then. So, you get a different response like excitement versus a knock on the door. A knock on the door might create a different response of arousal and excitement and barking and chaos.

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Then there's the sense of touch. My dogs get a massage every week they see the massage therapist come to the house for them. They love it. They like stand in line. I want to be first. All right. Picture a dog the first time you put booties on a dog, if, have you ever seen that? If you haven't, Google that on YouTube or do a YouTube search for it. Because it different with booties is like they go Cray-Cray, so different versus something that they know is going to create a different response.

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Dogs can smell excitement. They can smell fear on us. And that creates different responses in them. Taste. Why did some dogs avoid the taste of like medicine versus the taste of a treat? So, experience has created a catalog in the brain for these dogs, but new or different enter the dog, walking with new boots on creates a completely different response.

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So, different in dogs and people. It creates curiosity. Now curiosity could be engaged like, "Hey, what's that?" kind of curiosity. "I'm interested in that. Hey, what's, what's going on over there?" Curiosity could also be a cautious curiosity. And both kinds of curiosity could lead to reactivity down the road. Stick with me on this one.

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Take the example of it could be a child skipping, or it could be like, if you have a, a small white dog, it could be a big black dog. They're interested, they're curious, "what's... oh, I've never seen that before." Now, if you're walking with the dog and they're showing interest in the kid skipping, and they might start pulling towards that kid skipping. Now you might pull back on that because you're going in the opposite direction. And when you're pulling away from something, that actually for dogs they want to pull into that.

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In a lot of dog sports when we want to create drive for a thing, like of the sport of agility, we want to create drive for our dogs to go faster over obstacles. For bite work we want to create drive for the dog to spring and bite a sleeve. We use that opposition reflex, where we pull the dog back from something. So, if you're walking and your dog shows interest in something and they start pulling towards it and you pull them away from it, the next time the brain sees that they're going to pull harder.

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They're going to maybe start vocalizing. They're going to start going, "hey, I want that thing!" and the vocalizing might create a trigger in them. So maybe the third or fourth exposure they're going to immediately see that thing whether it be another dog or a child, they're going to immediately start vocalizing. Especially with a puppy it could be out of excitement, "Hey, Hey, Hey!"



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But as these experiences go on and they'd never get to figure out what exactly that experience is, the triggers create barking, creates growling. The dog because of their lack of ability to be able to understand what it is on the other side of the skipping child or the black dog, you now have a dog who is just reacting in a barking, growling way. If you were to take that leash off, they would charge at that thing now. All of that pent up, not being able to go. Now they might charge and just start sniffing, but they might charge and start circling and barking. They might charge and circle, bark, maybe even nip.

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So that is how just curiosity and in common interests can escalate to reactivity and possibly nipping. Okay. Now the other curiosity. The other curiosity, it could be a curiosity of the cautious curiosity. Could be that the dog is fearful. The dog might show that fear with their tail tucked. They might get their eyes wide.

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If you go to [Episode 4](#), here on Shaped by Dog, I talked about TEMP. The dog is going to show you with their posture and their mouth, that there are alarm bells going off in their brain. They may actually do what we referred to as alarm bark. So, if a dog's got a medium tone bark, "woof, woof, woof", when they are showing curiosity that's being cautious, they might get very shrill at the end of that bark. Instead of, "woof, woof", it might go, "Woooo wo wo woowoooo." That's an alarm bark. Danger Will Robinson. Okay. I got to stop using that reference because like 99% of you are too young to even know what it is.

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So, the alarm bark or a dog that curiosity that is cautious, it might be growling. "Oooh, I don't know what that is, oooh." Um, now it could escalate to, or it might just trigger like immediate fear that panic, "I've got to get out of here", or I want to run behind my mom's legs or I've got to try and escape this situation. They may pee on themselves. And if they can't get away and they are in close proximity with something that they were cautiously curious about, they may just lunge. Lunge and snap, possibly even bite.

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That is how curiosity, that is cautious, could turn to an incidence of reactivity or aggression. Think of yourself, you walk home and it's your birthday. And all these people pop out from behind the coach, "surprise!" And that's kind of like curiosity and then excitement versus you're lying in bed at night and you hear a thump downstairs. Uh, that kind of curiosity is like, Oh, that's different. "I... did you hear that? Okay. Where's, where's the dogs? Let's go."

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All right. So "*different*" creates curiosity. Curiosity isn't always good, but what's important is what happens during and afterward. And that's where you and I come in as the owners of those dogs. So, the dog is saying either, "Hey, I'm interested in that." or the dog is saying, "Whoa, I'm afraid of that." "Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. I'm afraid of that." If a dog says, "Hey, I'm interested in that." or "I'm afraid of that." you need to believe them. And you need to take that feedback as their owner and say, "I'm here for you. Let's figure this thing out together." So, the two strategies you need to be aware of are: in the moment and after the fact.



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Two strategies. So, in the moment strategy is going to involve either as I spoke about in a previous episode, you're going to either going to ignore, your going to manage, or you're going to train. When we have a challenge that's what we're going to do in the moment. Are you going to ignore, are you going to manage, or are you going to train? That could be your strategy after the fact too. "Oh yeah. He went off at some kid on a bike, but you know, whatever that, you know, maybe we won't see that kid again."

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If you ignore when your dog is saying, "I am worried or I am interested" and you do nothing, you plan nothing for the future, behaviors don't stay static. So that is very likely... now there's a chance the dog might get used to it and go, "Oh, that's a kid on a bike, oh that's innocuous. That's not a problem", but you're rolling the dice because it could also go the other way, where they get more and more driven to want to react to that stimulus.

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So, you're in the moment you could choose to either punish or reinforce. And you're going to go, "Whoa, Susan. Reinforce my dogs acting like a bit of a goober?" I'm going to reinforce that. Let me tell you a story. I was at an agility trial many, many years ago. I did a little workshop. And I went to an agility trial and the people whose home I was staying in, they had a bunch of Australian Cattle dogs, like a gaggle of them. I don't know. There was maybe five, six, seven. I don't know what a gaggle is.

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They were all in an ExPen. And whenever anybody with a dog walked by, they all went at the fence, aggressing, barrier barking, "Ra ra ra!" It sounded like they wanted to rip off somebody's limb. As you could imagine, they were not a fan favorite of everybody who had to walk by that. And to be fair to the poor dog walking by, that is unfair for them to have to deal with that. And so, I said to them, if you like, while I'm here this weekend, it was a three-day show, I will help fix that. They're like, yeah, that'd be cool.

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So, I had, I created small little treats, everything from cut up carrots to some pieces of meat and just interesting treats. Various levels of value. And I put them around that the dog couldn't get, around the outside of the ExPen. And I put a little sign at everything. 'If you're walking by with a dog, please just throw in a handful of treats.' Now I made sure I asked the people who own the dogs, "These dogs won't be aggressive to each other, would they? If we threw some treats in there." and they said, absolutely not.

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So that's what we did. Now after the first day, people walking by and the dogs were barking, aggressing at the ExPen, and I, you know, just keeps throwing. Now I did it myself. If I was around, I would just throw cookies in. They were concerned. They're like, "Susan, am I not feeding my dog for being aggressive towards another dog?"

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And that's what people at the end of the day around the bar said to them, "Why would you let her tell you to do that? Your dogs are getting cookies for being jerks." But there are two responses in life. There is a response you think of like, "I'm going to plan to stand back here and scare you."



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Or there is a response you have no control over. Like when somebody grabs you from behind, you're going to scream and try to run away, that's a reflex. With those dogs, those triggers have been built in that we bark at the fence. By day two, they were still barking at the fence, but not with the same gusto. By the end of day two, there was just the odd one. The young dog would bark and look at everybody else and everyone else is looking for the cookies. Day three, there was no barking.

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And so, what we were doing was changing the trigger. So, when you're in the moment and your dog is reacting or showing interest, your dog is saying, "I'm curious." What you want to do is minimize the fear by getting further away from the distraction. So, if it's a kid on a bike, get as far away from that kid as you can. Play the search game where you turn the dog away and you throw cookies on the ground. Now, if they're really fearful they will not going to eat.

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My favorite is to get them to tug on a toy. And then, that's in the moment, I want to minimize the stress of that experience. What most people would have you do, like the dog, he starts growling at a child, you would say, "Hey, what are you doing?" or worse you might correct the dog. That's actually throwing gasoline on a fire. Your dog is saying, "I'm uncomfortable. I'm a little afraid." And you're saying, "I don't care. You're not allowed to be afraid." Would you do that to a kid? "I'm a little, I'm a little bit afraid." Well, some people do that when they've paid to see Santa, the kid shows, and they're afraid and they go, "here, take my child." Not really a good plan.

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If your dog is saying I'm afraid, believe them. Go to [Episode 24](#), where I talked about the distraction index, increase the distance away. Set the dog up to be reinforced and then go home and create a plan. What am I going to do in this environment? So again, ignore, manage, or train. The management would be, "I'm never going to go near children on bicycles again." And that's really out of your control, not a good strategy. Ignore, take your chances but there's a lot of reactive dogs around this world with people who took their chances and it didn't go so swell for them.

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So, let's train. And the train is going to be creating a journal for that challenge, writing down what happened, where you were, what happened before it. So were you just in a crowd and a bunch of dogs put their nose up your dog's butt, your dog was already stressed or did you just get in an argument with a parking meter person and your dog could sense that stress and then they went off like what happened before and what's your plan to counter condition it?

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So, counter conditioning is being intentional about changing the trigger. So if it's something like a child on a bike, what's your dog like with one kid walking? And, you know, build up so that when you see a kid walking, good things happen, we're going to play a game of tug, or we're going to play some hand targets. When you see a kid walking, then when you see a kid skipping, when you see a kid pushing a bike, when you see a kid... and pretty soon a kid is either going to move from fear to ideally innocuous. They might even move to love. "Look, mum, there's a kid! That's a good thing, isn't it?" Right.





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So different can lead to reactive or aggression. But it doesn't have to be that way. It's all about you helping your dog to catalog experiences in a way that is appropriate for their future and wellbeing and yours and all the dogs around them.

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That's it for today on Shaped by Dog. Please, if you haven't done so, share this podcast with your friends. I love to hear from new listeners and what their big takeaways are from this podcast. So, leave me a comment. I promise I read each and every one of them. We'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.

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That's the reactive dog. We don't want that.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 4: T.E.M.P. \(Tail, Eyes/Ears, Mouth, Posture\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 27: Do Dogs Need Rules?](#)

[Podcast Episode 24: Help for the Dog who Chases Chipmunks, Bicycles, and the Neighbor's Cat](#)

[Video Blog: Understanding Your Dog's Triggers](#)

[Video Blog: Dog Body Language, Fear and Aggression](#)

[Blog Post: Leash Aggression in Dogs: Are We Trying To Put Out A Fire With Gasoline?](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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