

Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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One of the most common questions we get asked about here at DogsThat is that of the response people's dogs have to other dogs, particularly when they meet them on leash, dogs that they've never seen before, or it could be dogs they have seen before. Something that we're going to call the 'socially sensitive dog.'

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Now, the socially sensitive dog might take on three different visuals. The first type of socially sensitive dog I want to address is a dog that sees another dog and they notice that other dog, but they kind of just shrink maybe against their owner's leg or behind the owner's back, kind of peeking around at the dog.

They're just not so sure. And their body language screams that they're not so sure. That dog will be met with empathy. "Oh, what a sweetheart. Oh, it's okay, honey." The second socially sensitive dog might get invigorated by the sight of other dogs.

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If that dog's off leash, they might do things like tuck their tail and start spinning in a circle, or maybe just run laps of the room, or if they're at a park, they might just take off and run laps. If the other dog chases them, they might like get really low and then kind of spring up again and run in an opposite direction.

That dog gets invigorated. That's a dog who gets invigorated because they're socially sensitive, but they really don't know the best way to present or express themselves. Now that dog might be met by somebody watching from the outside with laughter. "I bet he's a lot of fun." "Oh, that looks like a really cool dog."

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The other socially sensitive dog and the one I want to talk a little bit about today is the dog that gets proactive. They take things into their own hands. "I'm not comfortable around these dogs and I'm going to be proactive by showing my teeth, maybe getting myself puffy, maybe growling, maybe lunging forward and quickly air snapping. Snap, snap, snap."

Now that dog socially is met with a lot of judgment. And the person on the other end of the leash holding that dog would probably feel a great deal of shame or would be met with conversations that would make them feel embarrassed. And I'm here to say, "I hope you don't."

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Because your dog is [a combination of genetics](#), of how they were raised early on. It's a combination of a lot of things. And on top of all of those things, it's your influence, your experience, what your mentorship has led them to know. So, potentially if I owned the dog, they might not be socially sensitive, but that's not to make you feel bad about owning the dog because it's a journey.

All of us here at DogsThat, the entire team, every single one of us feel passionate about two things. We would love to think that we are helping every dog on the planet live a better life tomorrow than they were living yesterday. We would love for every dog to live their best life possible.



Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

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And we know that if we can help you as the owner of that dog help that dog live their best life possible, then we know the rippling effect of that is that you as the owner who's trying to help that dog live their best life possible ends up in a place where you get to live your best life possible.

It's crazy how that works. And if you're in the midst of a proactive dog that the world is labeled as a reactive dog, it may feel like you're living the furthest thing from your best life possible. And this is the subject that I've talked about many times here on Shaped by Dog.

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So, if you want to jump over to our ShapedbyDog.com website, you can [type in the search 'reactivity'](#) and you will come up with a long list of other podcast episodes that will help you help your dog. Or you can jump over to YouTube and go to the playlist tab and you will see a playlist entitled '[Helping Reactive or Aggressive Dogs.](#)' And that too has got tons of videos that will help you help your dog.

This is another one that I hope will bring clarity to the entire process. And what I'm going to talk about today is broken into three phases that you can work through to help your socially sensitive dog. And it doesn't matter what response your dog is currently having of the three that I mentioned at the beginning of this episode.

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All of this will apply to each and every one of you, because here's the thing, the dog that is shrinking or the dog that's invigorating quite often ends up being the dog that becomes proactive. So, let's help you help your dog live their best life ever by helping them being less sensitive socially. The three phases that we're going to talk about.

The first one is the phase of growing confidence, and it happens both, growing confidence passively and actively. The second phase is practicing your code yellow protocols. The third phase is all about reflecting and recharging.

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Now I'm just going to remind you of something that I've mentioned in many of these episodes that if you have a dog who's showing social sensitivities, don't just jump into dog training because sometimes we can't just dog train a behavior problem because sometimes the root of that behavior problem could be things as simple as a thyroid issue.

So, I mentioned that [in episode 81](#) that you might want to go to your Veterinarian and get a full thyroid panel done because even if your dog is showing on the low end of normal, putting them on a smaller dose of thyroid medication can sometimes help that dog.

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Number two is diet. And this is very related to thyroid as well, because sometimes there's missing nutrients that creates a thyroid problem. But also as I mentioned when I talked about [my own dog This!](#), her social sensitivity became vastly improved when I lowered the protein in her diet and added a lot more various fruits and vegetables.

So, diet can also be a big contributor to your dog's social sensitivity. And thirdly, it could be pain. So, we want to rule all these things out, get your Veterinarian to make sure there isn't an obvious source of pain and/or a canine chiropractor and/or a body worker.



Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

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So, I believe, and I'm going to mention body work a little bit later, getting your dog checked out because the source may not be just that the dog is freaking out as some people might like to think. Okay. Let's jump into phase one. We're going to grow confidence. We're going to grow confidence, both passively and actively.

So, the passive growing of confidence, it's about the dog learning to relax. And if you jump into [podcast episode number 191](#), where I talked about the relaxation protocol that I use for simple animal husbandry, this is going to help you both clip your dog's nails and brush your dog's teeth and look into their ears or clean the ears, but also it's going to give your dog a behavior that you can rehearse in many different locations.

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So, growing confidence either passively or actively begins in a location of confidence, which means it's likely going to happen inside your house and likely in a room where the two of you can be alone. So, your relaxation protocol, you're going to start probably in your bedroom. And then you want to take it to the living room and the kitchen.

At least three different rooms in your house where you want to see the dog going into what is their relaxation position whenever you ask. They confidently go into that position happily. What I refer to as 'first rep right.' That it takes one cue, they show that they know what you want, and they happily do it.

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Get that in one location before you try to do it in five or six. Particularly get that in one or two around your house. Get confidence there, add a third around your house, then you're going outside. And if you live in Canada and it's in the middle of winter like it is here, you're not going outside just yet.

Maybe grow different locations around your house, but your outside's going to start in the highest confident location, which is probably going to be like a backyard deck if you have it, a backyard porch, or just in the backyard. Yes, it's changing the texture of what's under your dog's feet.

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So that change of environment changes the picture for the dog. They may not be able to do what is their relaxation protocol in this new environment, but you're going to maybe try it on a dog bed, try it on a towel. Eventually you want your dog to be able to do it on any surface.

So, you might have a surface in your house that's tile, a surface in your house that's carpet, then we're going to go outside to your deck, then we're going to go out to the lawn. Then we're going to go to the front yard. Now, if your front yard is very, very small, and your dog is socially sensitive, they're highly unlikely going to be able to relax.

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So, you might want to go to a friend's house. Obviously not with other dogs around, but a friend's house that you can just change the environment to grow that confidence. We want a dog that knows they can lay on a dog bed, they can lay on a towel, whatever is handy for you to take because eventually we need to take this on the road and get it to the park.

So, that's passive confidence. "I can relax. I don't have to be on high alert. I'm cool." Active confidence is when you give a cue for a game, the dog jumps into that game. Now I'm going to have links in the show notes to a lot of these games.



Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

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But things like [Hand Targets](#) or [the game Search](#) where the dog knows when you say the word 'search', you're going to throw a cookie or a treat on the floor for them. It's things like what we described on our YouTube channel, [Perch Work and Pivots](#). We want the dog to be able to pivot their back end.

We want them to be able to find what we call [Reinforcement Zone](#) on our side because we want to walk down the street with your dog knowing where they can earn reinforcement on both your left side and your right side. I'm going to say that one more time.

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Heeling or walking on leash doesn't just happen on one side, especially when we have a socially sensitive dog. Because we need to go, "Oh, there's another person walking towards us. My dog might not feel comfortable, so I'm going to say "side", which to my dog means, 'come on, oh, pivot over to the right side.'

And you want the dog to be comfortable on both positions, on both sides. There's also a game that I will call Home Zone, where I want my dog to go in between my legs. Now there's a lot of ways you can do it. You can start with having a dog spin in a circle with a target stick. And I talk about that on my YouTube video, all about [Target Work](#).

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Once we've got a dog who will spin in a circle with a target stick, you can then use your hand touch to get that dog to move in a circle. And if you want that to happen faster, you can do what I call 'targluring', where you take a cookie, get your dog's favorite treat, put it at the bottom of your palm and then cover it with your thumb.

So, your forefingers are straight and a cookie's there, and you're going to use that to get your dog to go into a circle. Once your dog's happy with that, and if they know [ItsYerChoice](#), they're not going to try and steal that cookie until you say "cook", and then they get the cookie. Once they're happy with that, we're going to go in a circle, then a sit.

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And then we're going to combine that with you just opening your legs a little wider than hip distance. Get them to spin in front of you and back them in between your legs into a sit. Grow these games in areas of confidence in your home.

What we're looking for, remember, is first rep right. Another game that I mentioned in [episode number 76](#) is the pivot and leave. And that is your dog's walking on one side, let's say, your left side. You pivot into the dog and then they go on your right side and you're leaving.

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I want you to grow that to not just pivot and walk, but pivot and run. And another final game, which is a pivot and run game, is your dog can be on your left side. You kind of crouch low. And give the cue "spin, spin", which means I'm going to run in a circle. At first, you're just going to go like a quarter turn and the dog gets a cookie.

Then you might go half turn, and the dog gets a cookie. You're going to try and run in a complete circle and your dog chase you and then give them a cookie. Eventually it's going to be a pivot. When you say "spin, spin", the dog's going to pivot on the side they're on in the complete 180-degree direction.



Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

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And then you're going to start running in that direction. Maybe one or two steps before you give them a cookie. Remember, these games are only effective to help the socially sensitive dog. If you get first rep right in those six locations, inside your house and outside your house before you ever try it anywhere off your property.

I think that's the biggest downfall with people who try to help those dog owners with socially sensitive dogs is they try to help them in the midst of the dog having a meltdown because they feel the pressure of another dog too close and they're lunging and barking and trying to bite and scream.

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And so, other people who are thinking they're helping will tell that person, "Oh, you have to correct them. You have to tell them that they're bad." The dog, once they are in a highly aroused state, cannot learn. I'm going to say that one more time. Any animal. If someone starts following you down a back alley—I don't know what you're doing in a back alley, stay out of the back alleys.

And they start walking faster and they get really close to you and you start running and they start running and they start making all this noise, "Whaa!" And then they say, "Do you remember algebra? What's the, what is the square root of—?" "No, no, I can't think. I'm in fight or flight."

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Your dogs can't learn in that environment. Please don't let anybody try to do anything in the name of dog training when your dog is feeling the pressure of another dog nearby. That's why we grow confidence in an area where the dog feels safe. And that is first, your home, my friend. Always the home first.

But we got to get to those different environments within the home. Okay so, you are going to play those eight different games that I mentioned. I know there's a lot. We're going to give you links so that you can play these games. They're all important. Our next phase is practicing your code yellow. "What the heck is code yellow, Susan?" I want you to think that there's three levels of comfort for your dog.

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The first level, we're going to call the green level. And that's where your dog will always engage with you. They'll always play a game with you. They'll always be up for learning something with you. They'll always do [a food puzzle](#) on their own. That is the zone of green. They'll always happily take a bone and chew on their own.

They'll always do the relaxation protocol with you. They're happy. They'll just fall asleep. That is the zone of green. I want you right now to think about all the different zones of green that you have for your dog. In and around the house. What about in the car? What about at a friend's house? What about at a park?

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What about at a busy dog show? What about at a fly ball tournament? Like my dogs are highly unlikely going to be in a zone of green when there's barking dogs having fun. Now, maybe outside of that building or in a different room, yes, I believe my dogs 100%, that could be a zone of green.

And I think it probably even if they've never played flyball could be a zone of green outside of flyball. So, where's the zone of green for your dogs? Now the zone of yellow is where your dog is a little concerned. "What's that? Oh, yeah, yeah." But they'll still go back to doing the relaxation.



Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

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They'll still go back to playing, but maybe they hear something and they'll, "Is that you Fred?" And then they'll go back to their zone, "Oh yeah, yeah. I can do this." So, zone of yellow is an area of obvious caution.

Then there is, the degrees of red. I say that the degrees of red because we don't go to, I'm concerned, "Is that, is that dad coming?" We don't go from there to all out chaos, screaming and lunging and barking. There is, degrees of redness.

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There's redness of, "I see a dog. I think I see a dog. I think I see a dog. I think, I think it's coming our way! I think it's coming our way!" And then there's, "This dog is lunging at me. Oh my God! I'm losing my s***!" So, in the degrees of red, the dog's arousal state is starting to accelerate. No acceleration of arousal for that socially sensitive dog is an acceptable level.

So, I'm not gonna tell you it's okay for the dog to be just in the zone of red. So, what is the code yellow protocol? The code yellow protocol is where you are going to take appropriate action for the degree of sensitivity your dog has, to what they are showing concern for.

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So, for example, if I was walking Prophet, who's a 19 month old puppy, who's pretty good with dogs and people, but he might show concern. Let's say I was walking, and it was a path. What I would do is I would back off the path, I would ask him to go between my legs, Home Zone, where he can feel protected, and I will just feed him as that dog or person, or bicycle goes by.

I'm going to be far enough away that he doesn't feel the need to be proactive. So, how far is that distance for your dog based on the concern they have. So, if your dog is not happy with other dogs coming near them, if you saw another dog in the distance, my code yellow protocol would be one of pivot and run. Pivot and retreat.

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You maybe don't have to run if you can see it far enough away. You're going to have a code yellow protocol. I'm not saying we have a code red protocol. Code red protocol involves you giving yourself a smack to your head and saying, "Damn it. I let my dog escalate. That's what Susan told me not to do. I blew the chance to grow confidence in a yellow environment."

Now, sometimes things happen and the dog creeps up on you, but that's why you're never walking with your phone out taking pictures or looking, if you have a socially sensitive dog. We're all about making that dog's life as good as it can be with that socially sensitive dog. So, code yellow protocol, you have a number of games you've played at home.

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I'm going to say that again. Code yellow protocol. You're not teaching them anything. Imagine a basketball player is in the middle of the game and the coach starts yelling, "Drop your elbow. Your elbow is too high. You're going to miss the shot." No, learning can't happen there.

Learning happens in confidence growing environments. So, you can't teach in a zone yellow. You've got to teach in zone green, my friend. You've got to practice your zone yellow protocol in zone green and hope that it becomes so triggered to be something that's fun and engaging that you get first rep right in any environment. And how do you do that? You practice it every day.



Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

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Front yard, backyard, neighbor's yard. I'm going to go to the park when I know there's no other dogs there so I can rehearse zone yellow protocol without the need for a zone yellow protocol. Do you get me? Our third phase is that of reflection and recharge. And that is, what went well with your outing with your dog today?

What would you have liked to change about your responses? What would you have liked to change about your dog's responses? Our dogs are just giving data to us every moment of their life. They're giving us feedback by their responses, by their choices.

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And hopefully when you are writing your [evaluation in your journal](#), you are reflecting on your outing with your dog. You're going to say three things that went great and one thing that you would like to have done differently. And then you can do those things differently.

If you have a zone yellow, or please don't tell me you had some zone reds. But if you had anything out of the green, what I want you to do is recognize your dog's stress level elevated. So, what can we do to change that? We can recharge the dog. Love body work here. If you don't know a good canine massage therapist, please ask around.

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At least once a month, get your dog a full body massage. It's such a great way for them to decompress. I will admit, I would say for the last 10 years, my dogs have got a body massage every single week. Now you could learn it yourself. There's people who teach canine massage, but even if you knew that I would still get a professional to do it at least once a month.

So, part of the recharge is decompression. That could be in addition to the body work. It could be letting the dog just do some sniffing if they like to sniff. It could be doing a food puzzle. That's just a little bit of decompression and enrichment before you try some engagement. Go back to your green zone and see if you can't play some of those games that I mentioned.

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And if you would like some help on your journey to giving your dog the best life ever, I hope you will turn to my team and I. If that's you, then what I would recommend for you is enrolling in our Home School the Dog program. Now, there's lots of information on my YouTube channel. I just want to be part of your journey.

If you feel you want a deeper level of coaching from myself and my team, our Home School the Dog program, it normally retails if you go to our website for just under 300 dollars. But if you are listening to this podcast right now and you write my team with a subject line of 'Socially Sensitive,' I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about your dog. Then we will give you a coupon so that you or somebody you know can join Home School the Dog immediately today with an 83% discount.

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We as a team are invested in all the dogs of the world. And I hope even if I'm not talking to you, you know somebody with a socially sensitive dog, please reach out to them, help them, give them this podcast episode. Just help them help their dog have the best life ever. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





Episode: #296

Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

Home School the Dog:

Write to us at wag@dogsthat.com the subject line "Socially Sensitive" for a very special opportunity to join us in Home School The Dog.

Learn How To Play ItsYerChoice:

[ItsYerChoice Summit](#)

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 236: Understanding Dog Fear \(Part 1\): Genetics, Trauma, And Your Dog's Well-being Shaped by Dog Podcast](#)

[Podcast Episode Search for 'Reactivity'](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Reactive or Aggressive Dogs: Key Insights with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 81: Sudden Aggression and Your Dog's Thyroid](#)

[Podcast Episode 204: Dog Behavior And Diet: Recovery For This! Beyond Dog Training Part 2](#)

[Podcast Episode 191: Get Your Dog To Calm Down With This Common Sense Protocol For Relaxation](#)

[YouTube Video: Susan Garrett's Hand Target: Dog Training Games Within Games](#)

[Podcast Episode 18: 4 Puppy and Dog Training Games for Acquired Bite Inhibition](#)

[YouTube Video: Susan Garrett's Perch Work Dog Tricks \(Pivots and Spins\)](#)

[YouTube Video: Understanding Your Dog's Reinforcement Zone \(RZ\) with Susan Garrett](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Target Training for Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 278: Food Puzzles: Key Mistakes To Avoid And Strategies To Help Your Dog Best Deal With Frustration](#)

[Podcast Episode 227: My Foolproof Strategy To Overcoming Dog Training Challenges](#)



Reactive Dogs! Why Dog Owners Need To Know About Green, Yellow And Red Zones And Social Sensitivity

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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