

How to Ensure Safe & Friendly Dog/Dog Greetings



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Picture this: you are out for a walk on a sidewalk in Central Denver. Your dog is sniffing, fixating on squirrels, doing her business and generally having a jolly good time. Then around the corner comes another dog who is attached by its leash to his owner or, in some cases, off-leash with the owner nowhere in sight. As the dog approaches, your dog becomes uneasy or starts to bark. The other dog stares at your dog and says hello right in your dog's face. Both dogs are nose-to-nose, attached to their leashes with no way out. They sniff quickly and then start growling and reacting or worse, the strange dog attacks your dog "for no reason."

I hear this excuse every day: "The dog just attacked for no reason!" I assure you, rarely do dogs attack for no reason. These two dogs started a defensive argument because both owners let them go face-to-face and feel threatened. It would be similar if I walked up to you and slapped you across the face as I said hello. In addition, each dog most likely showed several appeasement or "calming" signals that the humans missed. Calming signals include:

- Lip-licking
- Tongue flicking
- Blinking
- Head turns
- Yawning
- Sitting

These behaviors are essential in reading a dog's other body language, too. In this case, one or both of the dogs may have stiffened, pinned their ears back, lunged forward, or raised their lip, which could be attributed to fear and

insecurity. The best offense is a good defense, especially for an insecure, anxious dog greeting another dog face-to-face. Worse yet, if you let your dog go face-to-face, you are inevitably setting him up to fail. Who wants to do that?

Ideally, dogs should be introduced face-to-butt, rather than face-to-face. Dogs instinctively smell one another's anal region in order to introduce themselves. Humans shake hands, dogs sniff each other's butts. Nice, huh? When they smell, each dog gets a "picture" of who the other dog is, such as gender, hormone status, health, level of stress or friendliness and general demeanor. If dogs aren't given the appropriate opportunity to introduce themselves, they can become scared and defensive, and then act aggressively.

If your dog is leash reactive or extremely afraid of other dogs, I recommend pursuing professional help. But if your dog just doesn't know how to greet other dogs, or you don't know how to teach him, here are some helpful hints:

- Make sure your dog doesn't have full use of the entire length of the leash. Give him slack but keep him close. Just because the leash is six-feet long doesn't mean you have to use it.
- Use a head halter or front-clip harness. I prefer the Premier Gentle Leader (wide 5/8" nose-loop for larger dogs) and/or the Easy Walk harness. If it doesn't work, it either doesn't fit correctly or your dog is too adrenalized when you are trying to train them. That is to say, they have become either defensive or motivated by prey (e.g., cat, squirrel) and are only able to react instinctively using their hind brain. Until the dog has calmed down and has returned to a less instinctive state of mind (using the front brain), it will be virtually impossible to get them to listen to or obey your commands. Every dog hates the Gentle Leader at first. Slow acclimation, positive associations and proper fit are very important. Do not use leash corrections (e.g., leash jerks)!
- Avoid allowing your dog to make prolonged eye contact with another dog. Teach a "watch me" command and use it in all different environments and stress levels so your dog will pay attention to you no matter what is going on around him.
- When you see another dog approaching, take a few steps backwards and lure your dog around to face you, or hold your lure (treat or no treat—just give your dog a visual cue) on your belly button. Either allow him to gently lick on the treat while the other dog sniffs, or ask him to sit so the other dog doesn't think your dog is a threat. If he remains calm while being sniffed, praise generously and let him walk away if he wants.

- If you want your dog to sniff the other dog's rear, ask the other dog owner to turn his dog around.

- Never, ever punish, yell, correct, poke or hit your dog for acting defensively. If your dog is afraid and receives punishment for being afraid instead of you building his confidence by showing what you want, the dog will only become more fearful and associate dogs with punishment. It is much more effective to help your dog understand that good things happen when he is around other dogs, and that you aren't going to set them up to fail by making them go face-to-face with another dog.

- Lastly, if your dog is afraid of other dogs, or doesn't know how to interact, please do not bring him to the dog park. Please don't muzzle your dog and expect him to not feel threatened. Dogs just don't "get over" being scared if you force socialization. Flooding is a technique used by some that forces a fearful dog to deal with a stimulus that will elicit a fight or flight response while he is not able to either fight or flee. The rationale is that flooding will "teach" him that nothing scary happens during the encounter. However, flooding is very scary to a dog and the trauma is extreme, unnecessary and in most cases, teaches the dog to be more fearful outside of the flooding situation. Flooding rarely works, which is why many dogs at dog parks have

aggression issues. Of course, it depends on which dog park you go to, but a scared dog will still be afraid at a "good" dog park. Always set your dog up to succeed!!

The process sounds a lot more complicated than it is, but if you manage your dog by turning him around, the other dog will most likely know what to do. Dogs know which end is the good end! The end with eyeballs and teeth is intimidating, but the sniffing end is a wonderland of information to a dog. Next time you have a friendly dog in close proximity, turn your dog around and watch the magic happen. Your dog will thank you. If your dog is aggressive, has bitten another dog, or bitten you trying to get to another dog, please call for professional help as the behavior is a symptom of severe underlying causes. Using this technique before focusing on those causes could make your dog worse.

Kari Bastyr, MS, VSPDT, is an Animal Behaviorist and owner of Wag & Train. She is certified by Victoria Stilwell Positively Dog Training, and works closely with Victoria (from Animal Planet's It's Me or the Dog) and her world-renowned team to educate dog owners on positive, dog-friendly training techniques. For more information, please visit www.wagandtrain.com.



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