

Meeting Other Dogs



Dogs are naturally social animals and for most of them, being able to regularly interact with their own species is important for their mental wellbeing. Each dog is an individual in terms of how they feel about other dogs, and how skilled they are at interacting and communicating with others. In this fact sheet we'll give you some tips on how to help your dog's social life run smoothly!

Is My Dog Normal?

Whilst most dogs enjoy some level of interaction with others, some enjoy this more than others – and that's totally fine! There are very few adult dogs who will genuinely like every dog they meet, or who will tolerate rude behaviour from other dogs indefinitely.

Dog sociability levels often decrease over the course of a dog's life. This can be caused by negative experiences, but can also occur naturally. It is normal for dogs to become more selective as they mature into adults. Elderly dogs can often become less social over time due to physical health issues (e.g. not wanting to be jumped on!).



Remember that it is unrealistic to expect your dog to get along perfectly with every other dog they meet – just like us, they will meet some dogs that they really like, and others that they just don't click with! When dogs feel uncomfortable with the way another dog is behaving, they will use body language to communicate this.

If subtle signals aren't working, they may escalate to growling, snapping or otherwise "telling off" the other dog. This is normal dog behaviour and should never be punished. If this happens regularly or seems to be over-the-top however, it may indicate that your dog needs some extra support around others.

It is also possible to help maintain (and even increase) your dog's sociability level over time through your own handling skills as a dog guardian. The information in this fact sheet will help you to do this!

What about social skills?

Just as some dogs enjoy canine company more than others, they also vary in terms of how expertly they are able to interact and communicate with their own kind. Just as with humans, there is a particular etiquette which your dog is expected to follow when introducing himself to others. Some dogs are very polite and appropriate when making new friends, whilst others are less skilled!

Polite behaviours include:

- Avoiding direct face-face contact when approaching an unfamiliar dog
- Giving plenty of social signals, communicating friendly intentions (e.g. wide, sweeping tail wag)
- Reciprocal sniffing (sniffing and allowing the other dog to sniff too)
- Taking frequent, short breaks during interaction (e.g. briefly turning away before sniffing again)
- Asking consent to play before starting a game (e.g. play bowing and waiting for a response)
- Responding appropriately to communication (e.g. by moving away if the other dog is communicating that they are uncomfortable)

Impolite behaviours include:

- A direct, rushed approach to greet an unfamiliar dog (e.g. running over at full speed!)
- Attempts to bully or intimidate
- Pushy, over the top behaviour (such as barging or jumping on the other dog)
- Intense, prolonged interaction or sniffing, without any short interruptions
- Starting a game without first getting consent to play (unless the dogs know each other well)
- Humping
- Ignoring communication (e.g. not moving away when the other dog asks for space)

Don't Worry, He's Friendly!

Just because a dog is friendly, does not necessarily mean he has great social skills! Dogs who enjoy the company of others can still be rude and inappropriate with them. Does your dog rush up to every other dog he spots and jump all over them? This is not appropriate social etiquette!

Social dogs with poor social skills dogs tend to be desperate to make friends, but lack manners and are not good at reading the communication of others. They aren't able to pick up on polite requests from the other dog asking them to "back off!", meaning they often end up getting told off by the dog they are attempting to greet. The other dog is frequently labelled as aggressive or scolded for being unfriendly, when in fact their defensive response was a totally reasonable one in the face of such rudeness!

If you recognise the above behaviours in your own dog, he needs your support when meeting others. Avoid letting him run up to unfamiliar dogs off-lead, especially if the other dog is on-lead. Not only is his rude behaviour unfair to inflict on other dogs, but he is at greater risk of being bitten by another dog who is unable to cope with his attempts to make friends. This could lead to him becoming less social himself!

Similarly, never reprimand your dog for defending himself from a dog with poor social skills. Dogs should not be expected to remain infinitely friendly and tolerant in the face of inappropriate behaviour. If an unfamiliar person ran over to you on the street, and started hugging and kissing you, you'd probably try to push them away too! Try to support your dog in avoiding or getting away from rude greeters before he feels the need to defend himself.

Dog-dog communication

It is important to be aware of body language when your dog is interacting with another dog, particularly one he has not met before. By watching out for positive and negative signals from both dogs, you can ensure that your dog is enjoying the interaction, and step in to help at the first signs of any potential conflict. In this way, you can prevent your dog from having any negative experiences which might decrease his sociability level over time.

POSITIVE SOCIAL SIGNALS

These signals suggest that a dog has friendly intentions, and is comfortable during an interaction.

- Indirect, arced approach toward the other dog
- Avoiding direct head-head contact
- Soft, relaxed body posture and loose movements
- Tail wagging in a wide arc
- Ears, eyes and face soft and relaxed
- Possible brief sniffing of the face before moving onto sniffing the back end
- Frequent, short pauses or breaks in interaction
- Mirroring (copying the actions of the other dog)
- Play signals (play bowing, bouncing movements)

FEARFUL SOCIAL SIGNALS

These signals suggest that a dog is feeling fearful about another dog, and is not comfortable with the interaction (this may escalate to conflict if the interaction continues, and the dog feels unable to create space).

- Ignoring the other dog completely
- Not actively moving towards the other dog, no social signals showing desire to interact
- Attempts to avoid/move away from the other dog
- Looking to handler for support (e.g. glances to handler, jumping up at handler, hiding behind handler)
- Low body posture, crouching or creeping
- Tail held very low or tucked under
- Ears pinned back, eyes squinting or showing whites of eyes
- Lip licking or yawning when interacting

If you notice any of these signals, it is likely that your dog is feeling worried, and does not want to interact with the other dog. Help them to create space by moving away, or asking the other handler not to let their dog approach yours (or vice versa if the other dog is uncomfortable!).

NEGATIVE SOCIAL SIGNALS

These signals suggest that a dog has less friendly intentions, and that there is a high risk of conflict during an interaction.

- Direct, head-on approach towards the other dog
- Direct eye contact, or general hard staring at the other dog
- Stalking towards the other dog
- Stiff, tense movement and upright/forward leaning posture
- Tail held very high and stiff, wagging slightly
- Face and eyes hard, mouth closed and lips pursed forward
- Attempts to stand over the other dog, especially with chin held over the shoulders/back or a paw/paws on the back/shoulders
- Growling or lip curling
- Very slow/stiff movement when interacting
- Freezing (a sudden, quick freeze often comes just before an aggressive response)

If you notice any of these signals on approach, avoid interaction with the other dog. If you notice any of these signals during an interaction, call your dog away and end the interaction. If your dog regularly shows any of these signals when interacting with others, please get in touch with us for advice.

Tips for successful interactions

Being on a lead can make some dogs feel trapped and vulnerable during dog-dog interactions. The lead limits their freedom in terms of how they approach the other dog, and means they are unable to get away if they feel threatened. This can lead to defensive behaviour (this is why some dogs are more sociable with others when off-lead). The feeling of pressure from a collar being pulled tight can also cause some dogs to feel irritable or frustrated, potentially influencing how they respond towards other dogs.

Although on-lead greetings can be problematic, they are also very necessary. It is not always safe or appropriate for dogs to be off-lead when meeting others, either due to the environment, issues with recall or due to the social behaviour of the dog. By following the tips below, you can use lead-handling skills to help your dog feel comfortable and send out the right signals when meeting another dog:

- Choose a longer lead, so that your dog has the freedom to move naturally and communicate without being restricted. We advise a 2-meter-long training lead – these have a clip at both end and D-rings at several points along the length, giving you the option to shorten the lead when needed. Always keep some slack in the lead when greeting others, allowing your dog to move away from other dogs if they prefer.
- Using a harness can also help with on-lead greetings. Pulling against a collar can cause your dog to adopt a posture which may appear threatening to others. The feeling of pressure around the neck will also cause feelings of discomfort which can make your dog more irritable with other dogs.
- Make a habit of observing your dog's body language, as well as the body language of the other dog. If either dog appears uncomfortable or confrontational, do not allow a meeting.

- If your dog struggles with not greeting every dog they see, feed high value treats as you pass the other dog – this will help prevent your dog from becoming frustrated, as well as teaching them that not saying hello can also be rewarding.
- Always give your dog the freedom to choose not to greet the other dog if they don't want to. Avoid walking them towards the other dog or allowing the other handler to walk their dog over to yours. Instead, let your dog decide whether to approach or not. If they choose not to greet, respect that choice and move on. Dogs are much better at reading other dogs than we are; your dog may be picking up on some subtle signals that you have missed!
- Keep some slack in your lead during greetings. A very short, tight lead can make your dog feel restricted and vulnerable.
- Dogs with very good social skills will self-interrupt every few seconds during an interaction. For example, they may sniff the other dog for a few seconds, briefly look away and then start sniffing again. Many dogs will need help doing this! When interactions last too long without a pause, tension can start to rise. If your dog doesn't self-interrupt after about 3 seconds, call them away or distract them briefly before letting them say hello again.



These leads are pulled too tight, causing tension.

- Dogs will often circle each other whilst sniffing; this is a good sign, but it can cause the two leads to become tangled. This can lead to conflict when the two dogs become stuck to each other and unable to create space! If your dog starts to circle, follow him round and prevent the leads from tangling together.

Remember, if you have any questions or concerns about your dog's behaviour around other dogs, you can get in touch with us for free advice and support.

The information provided in this document provides general guidance on the matters outlined and is not intended to replace the need for you to take qualified and appropriate behaviour/training advice on these matters.

Please remember, that as an owner of a Forever Hounds Trust dog you have access to our team of qualified behaviourists and FREE behaviour and training advice. No matter what your behaviour or training question is, we are here to help. You can contact the team by emailing: behaviour@foreverhoundstrust.org

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