



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!

How social is my dog?

Whilst most dogs enjoy some level of interaction with others, some enjoy this more than others – and that's totally fine! Your dog will probably fall somewhere along the spectrum from **dog social** to **dog averse**.

DOG SOCIAL: These dogs genuinely enjoy interaction with almost every other dog. They will seek out and usually want to play with others. They will tolerate rude behaviours such as humping, being jumped on in greeting, or over-the-top play from other dogs (and may even enjoy them). Many puppies are at this level, but it is rare for them to remain truly dog social into adulthood.

DOG TOLERANT: These dogs tend to get along well with most others, and are generally fairly patient with dogs who show rude behaviours. However they will not put up with rude behaviour indefinitely, and will not get along with every single dog they meet. They will usually have good communication skills, which they will use to avoid conflict when they do take offense at another dog's behaviour. They will often enjoy playing, as long as the other dog has good play skills. Most adult dogs are at this level. They can get along fine with only minimal supervision and support from their guardians around other dogs.

DOG SELECTIVE: These dogs are more picky about other dogs. They will usually have a circle of friends (familiar dogs who they get along well with) but may not be comfortable around unfamiliar dogs. There may be certain types of dog that they don't like, or certain situations in which they struggle around other dogs. They are not overly tolerant of rude behaviours from others, and this may result in conflict. They often need to be introduced to new dogs in a certain way in order to avoid conflict. They need supervision, support and guidance from their guardians when interacting with dogs. Many adult dogs are dog selective, especially as they grow older.

DOG AVERSE: These dogs do not enjoy the company of other dogs. They will choose to avoid others, or will show defensive or overtly aggressive behaviour towards them. Some will have a select few canine friends, but are likely to be sensitive even around them, and to react with aggression when offended. These dogs need careful management and plenty of support from their guardians around other dogs.

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. Most puppies are extremely **dog social**, but it is normal for social puppies to become **dog tolerant** or even **dog 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! Most adult dogs are **dog tolerant**.

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!

My dog is dog averse – what can I do?

Whilst early socialisation and life experience play an important role in determining how your dog behaves around others, genetics also play a big role in shaping personality. As such, having a dog who is less social with others does not make you a bad dog guardian! However, it is possible to increase sociability levels through reward-based training and behaviour modification.

If your dog is very **dog selective** or is **dog averse**, please get in touch with us for free advice about increasing their sociability level. The tips below are aimed at dogs who enjoy interacting with others on some level - **dog averse** dogs will usually need some more specific behaviour input in order to change their behaviour around others.

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 downright rude!

POLITE GREETING BEHAVIOURS

- Indirect approach (often in an arc), avoiding direct head-head contact
- Plenty of social signals, communicating friendly intentions
- Reciprocal sniffing (sniffing and allowing the other dog to sniff)
- Self-interrupting (taking frequent, short breaks from interaction)
- Asking for consent before playing
- Responding appropriately to communication (e.g. by moving away if the other dog is uncomfortable)

RUDE GREETING BEHAVIOURS

- Direct, rushed approach (making a beeline), direct head-head contact
- Attempts to bully or intimidate
- Pushy, over the top behaviour
- Persistent, intense sniffing or licking of genitals
- Lack of self-interrupting (constant, intense interaction)
- Jumping on/mouthing the other dog without getting consent to play*
- Humping
- Ignoring communication (e.g. not moving away even when the other dog is uncomfortable)

* Dogs who know each other particularly well may skip the usual greeting behaviours and launch straight into play.

Just because your dog is **dog social** does not necessarily mean he has great social skills! Dogs who enjoy the company of others can still be rude and inappropriate when greeting others. 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 or attacked by another dog who is unable to cope with his attempts to make friends. This could lead to him becoming less social himself! If you would like advice on improving your dog's social skills, please get in touch with us.

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.

POSITIVE SOCIAL SIGNALS

These signals show 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

Meeting other dogs whilst on-lead is something which happens regularly, and which we expect our dogs to be fine with. However, on-lead greetings can actually be quite awkward for our dogs – and this is mainly due to how we handle them! If we think about the polite greeting behaviours and positive social signals described above, we can start to see how being on a lead might get in the way of normal dog etiquette.

For example a short lead can prevent your dog from taking an indirect approach, and pulling against a lead may make them appear upright, stiff and forward leaning. Being on a lead can also make some dogs feel trapped and vulnerable as they are unable to get away if they feel threatened, which can lead to defensive behaviour (this is why some dogs are only sociable with others when off-lead).

Although on-lead greetings can be problematic, they are also 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 sociability/social skill level of the dog. By following the tips below, you can help your dog to 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 the lead loose when greeting others, allowing your dog to move away from other dogs if they prefer.

- Using a harness is preferable to walking your dog on a collar for health reasons, but 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, or shows no interest in interacting, do not allow a meeting. Remember that your dog doesn't have to meet every dog they see! Being able to pass by another dog without saying hello is a really useful skill for your dog to practise. If your dog struggles with this, 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, hang back and let your dog decide whether to move forward 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!

- Try to avoid a direct, head-to-head approach if you can. If you walk directly at another dog with your dog on a short lead, it is very difficult for them to take a polite, arced approach. Walking along side by side (with a few metres of space in between the dogs) for a short period before greeting is ideal if possible. If you are walking directly towards another dog, try moving to the side to create a couple of metres of space between the two dogs. This will give them the space to choose a more polite and indirect approach.

- Keep your lead loose during greetings. A very short lead can make your dog feel restricted and vulnerable. If you need to move your dog away from another dog during an interaction (for example if you spot negative social signals) try to avoid physically pulling them away unless you have to for safety reasons. A sudden tightening of the lead will often provoke a reaction in a dog who is feeling uncomfortable. Instead, try calling your dog to you in a positive voice, and rewarding with a treat.

- Keep all interactions brief. Dogs with very good social skills will self-interrupt every few seconds during an interaction, briefly looking away or doing something else before going back to interact again. Many dogs will need help doing this – too long without a pause and either dog may start to feel uncomfortable. If your dog doesn't self-interrupt after about 3 seconds, call them away and reward them before letting them say hello again.

- Dogs will often circle each other whilst sniffing, which 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 preventing 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.

Helpful Information

Kennel Manager contact info: 07704 982140 or info@brightonrgt.org.uk

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