



Sussex North & Brighton Branch
Registered Charity No.206630

DOG INTRODUCTIONS/SOCIALISATION

Many owners worry about allowing their furry friends to meet other dogs, for fear of something going wrong. On the other hand, many owners go a bit over the top and encourage their dog to meet every dog they see, in a bid to “socialise” them. Socialisation is often misunderstood when it comes to dogs. There is the idea that dogs should meet every dog and person and be put in as many different situations as possible. Whilst it is true that lack of exposure and introductions can lead to a more nervous dog in new situations, this can also be the case if this stuff is overdone. The most important thing to remember with socialisation is that it is quality over quantity. Having many interactions, half of which are seen as negative by the dog, but not obviously so to the owner, can be just as, if not more damaging to how our dogs feel about other dogs, people, situations etc, then having no interactions, or having one very obviously negative experience.

It is important to get to know our dogs body language and the signals they give when they are feeling uncomfortable and want to leave. Just like with us humans, dogs’ don't like every dog they meet and should have the right to say, “no not today thank you” and have that decision respected. Signs your dog may not be happy to meet another dog or they are uncomfortable with a certain person, item, or situation include, but are not limited to:

- Lip and nosing licking (when they haven’t just eaten or drank)
- Whale eye (seeing the whites of their eyes more clearly than usual)
- Yawning (when they haven’t just woken up)
- Look aways
- Move aways
- Ears pinned back
- Tension throughout face and body
- Panting (when not hot or having not been exercised)
- Body positioned low to the ground

Make sure you are looking at the whole dog and look out for the combination and repetition and frequency of the above signals. More information on this can be found in our “canine body language” handout.

The 3 options

Exposure to what scares dogs (and us and any animal for that matter) will usually not make them feel better about what is scaring them (and it is not great for the relationship with the individual responsible for putting them in that situation as well), so it is so important that we listen to our dogs and give them space when they ask for it, to avoid them having to

escalate their behaviour to get the same result. Dogs have 3 options when they are scared or worried by something:

Option 1:

Option 1 is to move away. This option is often removed by being on lead, or in an enclosed area etc, so we need to encourage slackness in the lead, to give the feeling that they can move away if they want to and provide space to move away and when your dog wants to leave, let them leave and/or go with them if they are on lead, so they can learn that option 1 to move away is an option for them.

Option 2:

Option 2 is appeasement in the form of body language displays that are requesting space from the trigger. Dogs will appease to ask for space if option 1 and moving away is not an option. Examples of this are lip and nose licking, yawning, whale eye, ears pinned back, tension throughout the body. If space from the trigger still isn't an option or isn't listened to, dogs will often move to...

Option 3:

Option 3 is aggression, which has the intention of making themselves big and scary to get the trigger to back off. Most cases of a dog behaving in a way we perceive as aggressive, is actually due to fear, anxiety and frustration. The dog feels they have no choice when to make themselves big and scary, as that is the only thing that has a history of working in getting what is worrying them to go away. Aggression can start as a lip curl, bark, growl, snarl, lunge, nip and bite. It is very rare that you will in fact come across a dog that is genetically predisposed towards aggression, but every dog (yes, EVERY dog) can become aggressive if they feel that is their only option to get space from scary things, places and situations, to keep themselves safe.

The 3 second rule

Dogs generally decide whether they are compatible with another dog in approximately 3 seconds, so if your dog's body language is indicating they are comfortable to go in for a greeting and the body language of the other dog also looks good, check with the owner of the other dog and if permission is given, let them go in to say hello, keeping the lead as slack as possible but avoid them getting tangled and after 3 seconds, recall them away. Make sure not to drag them away unless it looks like things are going to turn bad quickly, as this can make the dog worry that there is something to worry about and create negative associations. Lure them away with a treat, if they are not responding to your recall word (our training guide on "Recall" will help with this"). Reward them for coming away and if both dogs, on both side of the meeting, look happy to go back in for a second meeting, then the chances are you are ok, but if any dogs in the interaction choose not to go back in for a second greeting, they should be allowed to leave and not continue any further. The

most important thing is quality over quantity when it comes to dog meetings, particularly with fearful dogs.

Top tips

- If you are introducing puppies and some older dogs, there is a chance they are going to vocalise. These vocalisations can sound worrying, such as barking and growling, but as long as their body language looks good, there is usually nothing to worry about. Just like when some puppies and dogs have a game of tuggy and have a good growl.
- Dogs can play rather rough at times. This is nothing to worry about as long as the play is even and there isn't one dog or the other that seems to be the one getting the rough end of the play or that wants to leave. If there is one dog who does not seem to be enjoying the play, intervene and give them a break, to prevent things going bad and also to prevent negative associations from forming.
- Reward calm and polite behaviour. If your dog greets a dog in a nice polite manner, reward them with whatever they find rewarding, such as treats, praise and toys.
- Be careful introducing dogs to each other, if there are precious resources around, such as food bowls, toys etc. This is particularly important, if those resources are known to be particularly valued by one of the dogs that will be involved in the meeting. It is best to be safe and keep these items out of the way to prevent any squabbles.
- Introduce a "not today" cue to let your dog know when they cannot say hello to every dog. To do this, select a couple of dogs on your walk that you are not going to allow your dog to say hello to. This should always be the case if the other dog does not look like they want to be greeted, but also select some other dogs who do look friendly to meet. This is to manage your dog's expectations and prevent frustration. To teach this cue, have your dog on lead and have some tasty treats to hand. Start to walk towards the other dog (who should also ideally be an on-lead dog, or a dog that won't run up to you). After a few steps towards the other dog, use your treat to lure your dog away to face the other direction, whilst saying "Not today". As soon as you are both facing away from the other dog, mark your dog (using a marker word or a clicker etc) give them a treat and walk away. Repeat this regularly to build up the training and understanding.

Extra help

If you are struggling, please get in touch with a qualified behaviourist. These can be found by copying and pasting the following link into your web browser:

<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/general/findabehaviourist>