

Dog-to-Dog Introductions



Introducing two dogs who have never met each other can be scary! However, some patience and an eye toward understanding dog body language can go a long way in promoting positive interactions between two dogs meeting for the first time.

Opposites Attract

Male-Female pairs tend to have fewer problems. On the other hand, conflict is more likely to happen between two intact dogs of the same gender. Hormones do play a role in determining how one dog responds to another dog, so be extra careful when introducing dogs of the same gender. That being said, dogs are all individuals, and ultimately they choose who they like and don't like. Even dogs of opposite genders can get into tiffs and fights, so always be diligent during interactions.

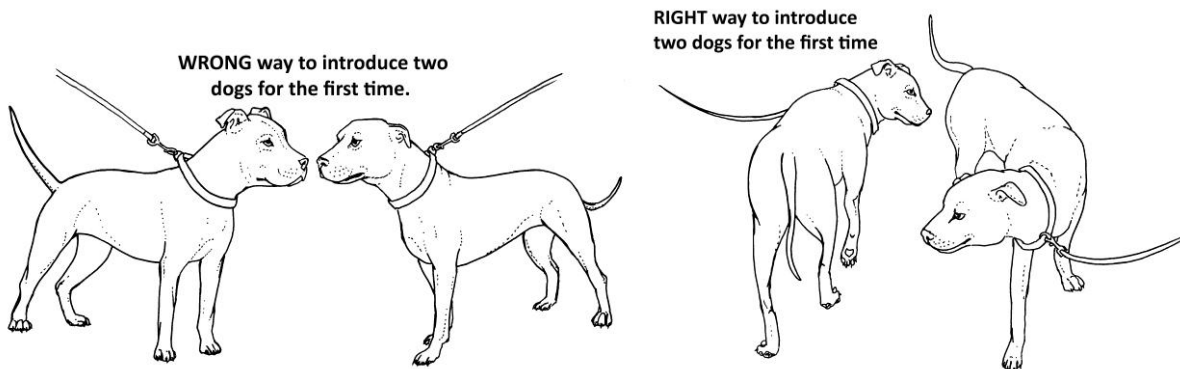
Start on Neutral Territory

Have another person help you take the dogs for a walk on neutral territory. A casual, relaxed 20 minute side-by-side (but not too close!) stroll can go a long way toward acclimating the dogs to one another. Note each dog's body language. Is either dog stiff? Are hackles raised? Tails tucked or held high and stiff? If so, calmly increase the distance between each dog until both dogs are fully relaxed.

If you suspect that one or both dogs might take time to warm up to the new dog, exercise each dog individually (and out of sight of each other) for about 15 to 20 minutes before you have them meet one another for a side-by-side stroll. Exercising a dog helps to relieve pent-up energy and makes the dog less likely to want to start trouble.

On Leash Introductions

Never introduce dogs on leash with a direct head-on, nose-to-nose greeting. Dogs don't usually approach one another straight on when allowed to act freely off leash. While an initial greeting should be on leash in case either dog objects, it's best to try to mimic free movement without getting leashes tangled when doing on leash introductions. Always make sure collars and leashes are secure. Allow dogs to approach each other from the side, sniff a few moments, and then move on, ending the brief on leash introduction while things are going well. Keep leashes loose and untangled at all times unless you have to pull a dog away due to an aggressive reaction from one dog. Never yank a dog away from another dog unless you need to do so for safety reasons. Yanking a dog away from another dog can provoke an aggressive reaction. Instead, move forward, in line with the dog, and call the dog happily to you like you're continuing on your walk.

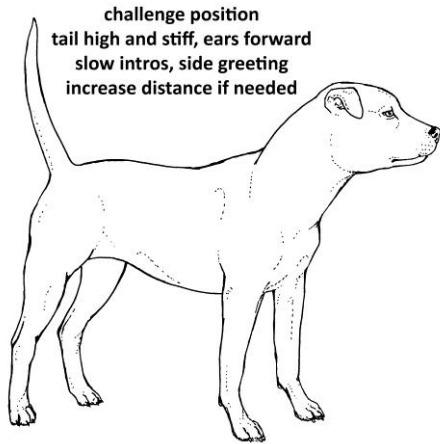


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Body Language Basics

When introducing dogs, pay close attention to each dog's body language because body language is an indication of a dog's mental and emotional state. Only allow increased interaction between two dogs when both dogs appear comfortable.

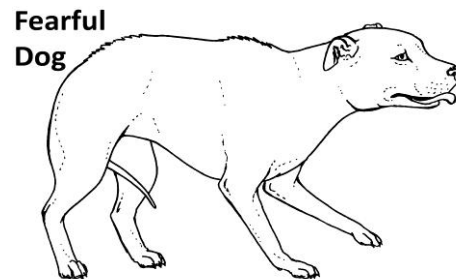


A relaxed dog tends to have its tail held lower (but not tucked). The tail may be wagging slowly in line with the spine or slightly lower, or it may be held in a neutral position. A happy but excited dog may hold and wag the tail slightly higher than the spine. An aroused dog (not to be confused with “happy”) might hold its tail high in the air—almost pointing toward the sky. The tail might be stiff and wagging quickly. If you see either dog with its tail tucked or held stiff and high in the air, calmly increase the distance between the two dogs. Keep in mind that breeds vary in what is considered a “neutral tail position.” An Akita’s tail is very different from a Pit Bull’s, for example.

A relaxed dog will hold its ears in a neutral position. An interested dog will hold its ears forward. Ears flattened back toward the head indicate fear or uncertainty. Ears far forward (combined with a stiff and high tail) indicate an aroused dog that may seek to challenge the other dog.

Hackles are the hair on the back of a dog’s neck and shoulders. When the hair stands up straight, the dog is in an aroused position. Arousal may indicate fear, excitement, or aggression, so proceed with caution when you see a dog raise its hackles.

Notice the dog’s eyes. Is the dog looking sideways at the other dog, not turning its head, so that you can see the whites of its eyes? If so, the dog is likely not comfortable with the situation. Fearful dogs will tend to tuck their tails and slink low. If either dog does not appear comfortable, increase distance.



Getting to Off-Leash Play

Recommended equipment to have on hand:



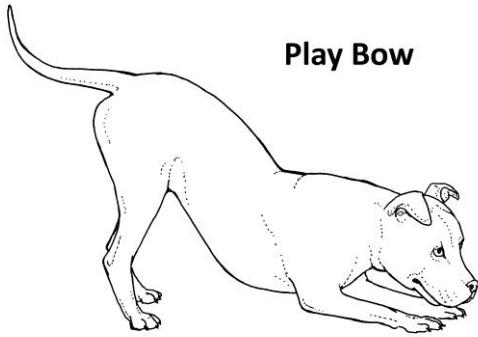
- Spray Shield (or other citronella or humane spray-based deterrent)
- A break stick (highly recommended): a wedge-shaped piece of wood, plastic, or hard nylon used to pry open or block a dog’s bite. Available online through retailers such as Amazon.com or O'Brien's K9 Supply.

After the dogs have met on neutral territory and appear to be relaxed toward one another, take them to a secure, fenced yard. Each dog should have its own handler holding the leash. A leash at least six feet long

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generally works best. Keep the dogs on leash inside the secure, fenced yard. Remove all toys, food, bones and water bowls. Make sure no other animals are present.



Play Bow

Keep the leashes very loose. If the dogs still seem relaxed and happy, let them approach at their own pace and in their own manner, but do not let either dog posture or approach head on. If you notice one dog doing so, calmly increase the distance while praising the dog for coming with you. A dog that drops its chest to the ground, with its rear in the air, is inviting the other dog to play. Make sure the other dog is willing to accept that invitation before proceeding to off leash play.

Remember the following basics:

- Keep leashes loose at all times (tension on the leash can heighten a dog's reactivity)
- Do not let the leashes get tangled (so adjust your positions to prevent tangling while keeping the leashes loose); you will want to quickly separate the dogs if either dog gets snarky
- Stay calm and positive
- If one dog appears to be uncomfortable, calmly interrupt the interaction between the two dogs and praise both dogs when they are back with their handlers.

After the dogs have interacted on loose leashes, and if all appears well, drop the leashes. Keep close to the dogs, but remain calm. If the dogs are interacting nicely, let them continue to interact. Do not let one dog mount or hump another. If you see this type of behavior, gently intervene. Periodically call each dog back to its handler to ensure you remain in control of the situation. If either dog begins to stiffen up, get snarky, or you sense that things aren't going well, calmly leash both dogs and end the interaction (but remain positive).

If the dogs get into a "tiff" you can use the spray deterrent to try break it up and immediately leash both dogs. The spray deterrent may not work, however, so you'll want to act quickly to grab each dog's collar (one person grabs one dog) and end the interaction. If things escalate very quickly (which should not be the case if you were properly reading the body language before letting go of the leash), you may need the break stick to safely separate the two dogs.

Dog Fight Safety Tip: Do not place any part of your body in the middle of a dog fight unless you wish to get bit. Realize there is always a danger that, when you separate two fighting dogs, you may end up being bitten. A dog can redirect on you or a part of your body may get in the way of two fighting dogs. Be careful!

Stay calm during a dog fight. Dogs often make lots of noise, but if you keep your head and respond quickly, you can quickly and effectively separate two dogs. Avoid pulling off a dog that has a firm grip on another dog. You may cause more serious damage to the "victim" dog. Instead, use a break stick to separate two fighting dogs. Always have a second person on hand when introducing dogs because two people are needed to effectively and quickly separate fighting dogs. If you do not have a break stick handy, wait until one dog has adjusted or released its grip to pull the dog away.