

Introducing Your Newly Adopted Dog to Unfamiliar Dogs

Many dog owners want their dogs to be social with other dogs. Some dogs thoroughly enjoy the company of other dogs while others would rather spend their time with their new dog parents. When adopting an adult dog from a rescue organization, information on the dog's sociability with other dogs is not always known. Even when information on a dog's sociability with other dogs is known, the dog may still pick and choose which dogs he or she may want to have as "friends." In either case, the following guidelines will help you introduce your newly adopted dog to unfamiliar dogs.

Step 1: Neutral Territory

It is best to introduce unfamiliar dogs on neutral territory. You could introduce the dogs on opposite sides of your street, on leash, however bear in mind that from the perspective of your dog, the area in front of *his* house could still be considered your dog's territory so you may want to start the introductions at the end of the block, or preferably a block or so away. Alternatively you could bring the dogs to a public park, start by walking them 10' apart, on leash, and then slowly move them closer and closer together. Allow them to sniff each other all over. Watch for signs of discomfort or aggression including: stiff body, hair along the back raised, licking of the lips, turning away, baring teeth, growling, or mounting. If you see any of these signs, slowly move the dogs away from each other and continue to walk together approximately 4-5 feet apart, for several minutes, and then try to introduce them again. It may take several introductions before the dogs warm up to each other. Signs of friendly behavior include: relaxed and loose or wiggly body, fast tail wag, and play bowing. If the dogs are friendly towards each other, and you are in an enclosed dog friendly public area, then remove their leashes and allow them to play. Some dog friendly dogs get very excited when they see other dogs and may bark incessantly and pull to the other dog, or even mount other dogs out of excitement or to begin play. If you are unsure as to whether or not the barking is aggressive or just due to excitement, observe the dog's body posturing and look for the signs of friendly behavior and discomfort listed above. In cases of severe aggressive displays, growling, baring teeth, or lunging, or if you are simply not sure as to how to interpret your dog's behavior around other dogs, consider contacting a professional, such as a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), a board certified veterinary behaviorist (DACVB), or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) for help.

Step 2: Your Dog's Yard

Follow step one first. If all goes well, then you can introduce the dogs to each other in your backyard if your goal is to have playdates. Remember that this is your dog's territory so he may behave differently toward the other dog. First, pick up all toys and bones that may be lying around your yard. Even dogs who are friendly towards other dogs may guard possessions from those dogs, which may result in a dog fight. Next, bring both dogs into the yard on leash, introducing them on leash first. Observe their body language again, watching for signs of discomfort or friendly behavior. If they begin to start playing while still on leash, then remove their leashes and allow them to play. Continue to observe them. Some dogs may become overstimulated and begin to play too rough. If this happens, stop the play for several minutes to allow the dog to calm down. Once calm, allow the play to resume. Continue in this manner until the dog learns to play nicely. If you initially observe signs of discomfort, walk the dogs around the yard on leash for a while. If the signs of discomfort continue, then call it a day. Try again another day. If the signs of discomfort alleviate, and the dogs appear relaxed around each other, then remove their leashes. Be observant. If signs of discomfort reappear, put both dogs on leashes and remove the nonresident dog. You can either try again another day, or accept the fact these dogs simply do not care to be together – and that's okay too!

Step 3: Your Dog's Home

Your dog's home, like his yard, is perceived as his territory. Follow steps 1 and 2, if you have a yard, before bringing an unfamiliar dog into your home. If you do not have a yard and plan on bringing your dog's outdoor friend into your home, follow the instructions in step 2 anyway. Pick up all food, chew bones, and toys that maybe lying around. Put both dogs on leash again. If they appear relaxed, remove their leashes. If they do not appear relaxed, do not remove their leashes. Just sit with them on leash for a while, perhaps while having a cup of coffee or tea. If they still appear tense, then leave and try again another day. If they do not warm up to each other during the next visit, then they may just be better friends outdoors, on neutral territory.

Bringing Your Dog To A Dog Park

Many individuals who live in apartments, or who simply do not have a backyard, choose to socialize their dog in dog parks. Dog parks may provide a good means of socializing your dog with other dogs and people, and may provide good physical and mental stimulation. However, you must understand that bringing your dog to a dog park increases the potential for injury from another dog, or the contracting of parasites and disease. If you choose to take your dog to a dog park, it is strongly recommended that you wait until you have trained a very good recall so that he will come when you call him. A safer alternative to provide dog-dog socialization, and exercise, is to have your dog make one or two doggy friends and schedule playdates at other locations.

It is important to remember that not all dogs want to interact with other dogs even though we *humans* think they should have contact with their own species. Some dogs just need a loving, caring owner to live a happy life.

Barbara Pezzanite, Ph.D., CPDT-KA
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist