

TEN THOUGHTS ABOUT ON LEASH GREETINGS By Jen Thornburg Dog Training Reactivity

Look, I hate to always be the spoilsport. I know it's tempting to encourage your dog to make new friends, especially if he's digging it. (Ha. digging it.) But greeting other dogs while on-leash may not always be the best choice for your dog.

See, dogs prefer to greet other dogs in a very specific manner. In a typical greeting, a social dog will approach an unfamiliar dog in a banana curve with a loose body. The dogs will quickly sniff each other's noses, then rear ends, and finally sniff noses again, focused but relaxed. If they were to meet each other off-leash, they may move on after a few seconds, they may play, sniff or run together or they may even fight. Or maybe they'd find something more exciting to do with the afternoon. What they won't do is stand around, awkwardly, while their people stare at them urging them to be friends. So humiliating.

Fight or Flight

On-leash greetings can often create too much tension for dogs to handle. In an instant, dogs (and people) can become tangled up in the leashes- not a great scenario for dogs who have just met and are feeling vulnerable on-leash. Dogs have a *fight or flight response*. They typically will try their best to get away. If a dog is on-leash, he may feel his flight option has been eliminated. That leaves him with only one option, even if he is the lover-not-a-fighter type.

Dog Communication Reduced

Dogs communicate primarily by scent and body language. They are sensitive to very minor changes in position and eye contact. Dogs who may be great at interacting off-leash will sometimes have on-leash reactivity issues. This may be due, in part, to the confusion that occurs when body language is stifled by forced greetings. In addition, the dog has no room to perform displacement behaviors, such as sniffing, which may alleviate stress.

Not All Dogs Want to Make Friends

Not all dogs want to be social butterflies. Maybe your dog is reactive on-leash, maybe the dog heading your way is afraid of other dogs and their owner has never even noticed. Dog sociability generally declines with age and, after age 5 or so, many dogs feel they have enough friends. Do you want to shake hands with every person you come across in the mall? Not me. Some dogs don't want to sniff up another dog. Or be sniffed up!

Reinforces Bad Habits

Say we know both dogs are dog-social. In fact, they're so excited to see one another that they have forgotten their lovely leash manners. One might think "Oh, what's the harm in a little pulling between friends?" The harm is that inappropriate behavior is being reinforced and getting stronger. Do you really want your dog to get better at pulling? No.

Psst. On-leash greetings undermine polite walking skills. The goal for passing another dog is exhibiting only mild interest.

Stand Up for Dogs

Not only do we not know the person coming toward us with their "He's friendly!" dog, but we also don't know their experience or skill level as a pet dog owner or handler. Safe to bet if they are chasing me and the nervous dog I am walking up the street, they are the very last dog and human we need to greet. Your dog is not for the amusement of the general public, or for anyone to practice their own dog's social skills. You're not there to be polite. Remember: you are the one who has to live with your dog.

Walks Should be Fun

Let's talk about kids. We love to see our dogs greet tiny humans. It warms the heart. But not every dog feels secure enough to greet complete strangers and many do not have experience with children. By avoiding these interactions while you are unsure, you are ensuring that all of their experiences on our watch are positive ones.

Just No

But just say both dogs appear to be friendly, well-behaved, consenting adults who would just like to say what's up. How about then? Well... Maybe? Appropriate greetings do not come naturally for dogs or people, we all have to learn them. So, how does a dog get these beneficial skills, socialization, and exercise? If your dog is interested in making some new friends, here are some things you might consider:

A Few Good Friends

Securely fenced yards are the best places to let dogs play with *compatible* and social dogs. Play should be supervised and frequent breaks are important too. End the session on a good note when the dogs are tired. Don't wait until they are exhausted.

Parallel Walks

If you have a friend with a dog, leash up your dogs and go for a nice long walk together. Parallel walking keeps the dogs busy walking but without all that tension. All their needs are being met and you're getting some exercise and social time with your friend too. It's a win-win for the dogs and the people.

Trail Walks

Another option to get your dog some exercise and sniffing for enrichment is an on-leash hike. After smelling the same old hydrants and mailboxes day after day, hitting the trail is a real treat for the dogs. Solo or +1. Single-file trail walking allows your dog to share a favorite hobby with a friend without the pressure of face-to-face greetings.

Dog Parks

You may notice that dog parks are not on this list. That's another blog post for another day. I bet that, with some networking, you could provide a safer, more structured, less stressful environment for your dog to run and play with other dogs than a dog park full of unknown dogs. If you are interested in setting up playdates with social, savvy dogs who just want to chase and be chased, hit us up. We know all the best dogs.

If you must allow your dog to greet other dogs while on-leash:

- Make sure you and the other handler are on the same page with the plan.
- Leashes should remain loose and if either dog can't greet on a loose leash, abandon the mission.
- Watch closely for body language that looks tense. Educate yourself on what to look for.
- If you are at all uncomfortable with the interaction, don't give it the opportunity to escalate.
- Don't allow the dogs to play while leashed as it can cause them to get entangled quickly.
- Keep the encounter brief! Let your dog do the nose/butt/nose sequence and then move your dog away. This should be no more than 8 seconds.
- DO NOT tighten the leashes to move the dogs away. Instead, call your dog on a loose leash to end the interaction.
- Be aware. Stay cool. And don't put your dog in bad situations.

Now get out there and walk your dog on the opposite side of the street from your neighbors! And don't forget your treats!