Introducing Dogs

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The way we introduce dogs can make the difference between them getting along or having issues. Some dogs are very social with their own species with wonderful social graces or be overly excited and barely able to control themselves. Some dogs have lower tolerance levels towards other dogs. Other dogs may be fearful of their own species. Some dogs may be great with certain dogs but intolerant of strange dogs. Other dogs may be fine with puppies and older dogs but not handle adolescent dogs well. Some dogs may be predisposed to heightened dog aggression. Some dogs many be fine until the play gets rough. While others may be great until there is some resource involved (food, toy, even the owner). Breed may play a role in how a dog gets along with others. Livestock Guardian breeds may have less tolerance towards dogs they are not raised with. If a Livestock Guarding dog was great with all dogs, people, etc., this will be a liability for a rancher. Terriers, in general, can be feisty dogs. They may not start a confrontation but in many cases, a good terrier will not back down from a perceived challenge either – and who is to determine what that challenge is? Within a breed, you can have a wide range of how individual dogs will behave with others of their own kind. My personal belief that how a dog will interact with others of his species is based on a combination of factors including: heredity, socializing, and the amount of work the owners are willing to do. ***This is no substitute for professional intervention if needed and is just a basic look at introducing dogs. Please remember that no matter what we do, some dogs will never accept their own kind as playmates or pack members.***

Before introducing dogs, it is important to understand canine body language. Some dogs are very "loud" with what their bodies are saying while others are subtle. It helps to know how your dog expresses himself. Good postures to look for are the play bow (front end down, butt up and tail wagging) with what some people describe as just a happy looking dog. Dogs may use calming signals such as head held low, turning the head to the side, lip licking, yawning, avoiding gaze, sniffing the ground, to help diffuse a stressing situation. Be concerned if you see raised hackles, stiff legged gaits, dog "up on toes," tail high and stiffly wagging, growling (with or without teeth) and staring. If the concerning behaviors occur, move the dogs away quietly and when they are relaxed and looking at each other calmly, reward and then try again. (Provided a dog was not attempting an outright fight). Some television shows have trainers artificially getting dogs to exhibit calming signals by dropping food on the ground, etc. Do not attempt these actions unless you are working directly with a trainer. These techniques could backfire if not properly employed. (Please do a search for Turid Rugaas, Dr Ian Dunbar and Dr Karen Overall for more in depth information on dog body language). It is also important to know different vocalizations and your own dog. A growl may not be a sign of aggressing. A growl may indicate curiosity, confusion, fear or excitement.

All dogs are territorial to some degree. Choose a neutral location for at least the first greeting. Though dogs behave differently on lead than they do off, you want to have the dogs leashed, just in case. Keep the leads loose. Tight leads convey stress to the dogs and increase the chance of an issue. Do not use retracting leads! They lack the ability to control a dog. Keep a calm voice and make the situation positive. The first greeting should be quick. Limit the greeting to a few seconds of sniffing. Then calmly separate them. Have the dogs each do a behavior such as a sit, and reward. If the first greeting went well, try the quick greeting again. You want to keep the greetings short so there is limited chance for the greeting to escalate into a challenge. Dogs viewing the greeting positively have a better chance (provided there re not other factors) of seeing each other positively. If there is a challenge or a perceived one, then there is more chance of the dogs will see each other negatively. Forcing dogs together when one is showing stress signs, forcing one dog on to the territory of another, having "high desire" resources (pig ears, stuffed bones, favorite toys, etc) in the mix can all undermine what you are trying to do. If you stress, yell, leash yank, etc, your behaviors will affect the dogs'.

If the dogs get along this way, go to an area separated by a fence they can see through and remove the leads (if it is safe to remove the leads). Alternatively, put the dogs on long leads so they can run a bit on opposite sides of the fence. Again, watch that body language. If you see anything that indicates aggression, separate the dogs calmly. If the dogs seem to get along well when divided by a fence, then you can try a play date on neutral grounds. Again, watch that body language and separate before things escalate.

Dogs will develop their own hierarchy, which we must respect. It is human nature to want to coddle and comfort the lower dog. We may want to give this dog attention first, treats first, etc. However, this artificially puts the lower ranking dog above the higher-ranking dog. This could force the higher ranked dog to try to reestablish the developing order and cause a scuff. It is impossible to predetermine accurately canine rank based on one or two greetings. It is not uncommon for the male to out rank a female, but not always. The adult in his prime may out rank the senior and the pup, but not always. Some breeds are more self-assured and willing to take control if needed while individuals within that breed may not be. It will be through observation of the dogs that you can start to get an idea of how the dogs are setting their hierarchy. For the sanity of the dogs: respect their hierarchy and top dog comes first.

Again, it cannot be emphasized enough that not all dogs are meant to get along. Sometimes the best you can hope for is a dog you can teach to tolerate other controlled dogs walking past.

If you have any concerns with what you are seeing with your dog or just want advice before introducing your dog to another, contact a good trainer or behaviorist.

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