

# Safely Greeting

## Making friends with a dog for the first time

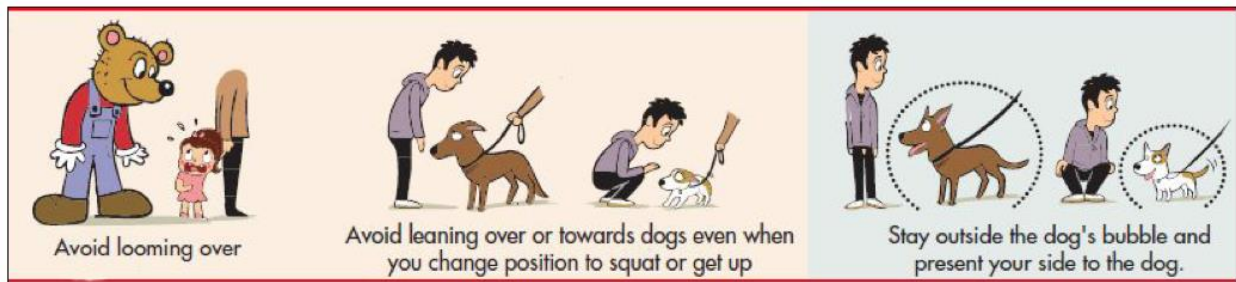
### *A happy dog: Open mouth, loose tongue!*

Understanding dog communication and body language is a very important part of making friends with dogs and teaching appropriate social behaviour to your own dog. It is important, not only for the purpose of understanding your dog at home, but also when meeting other dogs in social situations. Getting in the habit of reading dog communication and knowing how to respond to what a dog is saying to us is especially important when children are involved. As we get more experienced with paying attention to what our own dog, and those surrounding it, are saying to us and to each other, we are more likely to set ourselves, and our dogs up to have social success without unpleasant occurrences. When we are with our own dogs, we often find ourselves meeting other dogs in many different situations. We meet dogs on walks, in dog parks, at vet clinics, training classes, and so many other environments. Now, let's learn what we are looking for before we greet a dog, or allow our dog to meet another, and how to then say hello appropriately.

As our dogs are social beings like we are, we must consider their feelings as well as our own. This is often a tough concept for us to think about as we expect that our dogs, and others should be friendly all the time. While it is ideal if all dogs in a certain situation are friendly and happy to see each other and their accompanying humans, children included, this is not always the case. We must respect that, just like humans, dogs do not always like each other (even if they generally like dogs), they are not always used to the habits and greetings of all humans, and sometimes, they are just having a bad day. How can we set ourselves, our dogs, and our children up for success in social situations? By understanding, listening, and respecting the needs of each being involved.

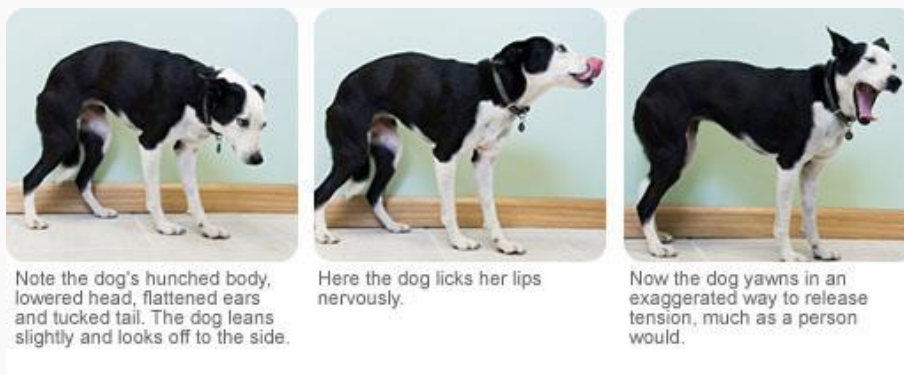
We will start with the part about understanding what a dog is saying to us with their body. Dogs communicate primarily through body language. Generally long before we get a bark, or a growl, or even a lick to say hello, we will see other communication letting us know how the dog is feeling, and how we are likely to be greeted if we go forward. Before we say hello, allow our dogs or children to say hello, we should be looking for a dog with a soft, wiggly body. We ideally want to see a loose open mouth, maybe the tongue is dangling on the side, soft eyes (not a lot of white in the eye, 'normal' sized pupils), ears that are neither flat on the head coming forward, or backward, a tail that is either in line with the back, a bit lower (not between the legs), or maybe just a touch above the back, and a soft wag that wags with the whole body! Be careful! If a tail is wagging slowly, very high, or tucked very low, and the body is still, this is not a happy wagging tail. The general rule is that the body of the dog is fluid and soft, no tension to be seen. We also want to make sure that when we say hello, the dog comes toward us. If we move forward toward a dog, or put our hands on them and they move away, or turn their head away from us, we should respect that this dog, in this moment does not actually wish to be patted.

Now that we understand what our dog is telling us, yes I want to say hello and be patted, or no I am not in the mood right now, how do we listen? My favorite thing to teach children is the '3 second' rule. This works well for adults as well. This rule is that you pat, or touch a dog for 3 seconds, then you move back just a touch, give the dog some space, and see what his choices are. We can continue to repeat this for a minute or two to see what the dog's natural choices are. Does the dog move into you for more? Does the dog move away? If the dog moves away, he is clearly telling us that he is not too into it right now. That does not mean that he will not appreciate us later, but it does mean that, in that moment, he is just not in the mood. Sometimes we can see a dog turning his head from us, or moving away from us as we approach. This is a dog saying very politely, I do not wish to meet you right now. It is important for us to respect this communication for this is his only, and most polite way of letting us know that he may not be too friendly if we continue with our greeting. Believe it, or not, if we offer a dog space when he is asking for it, we are likely to get his attention and have him come to us for a greeting. When that happens, it is such a rewarding moment! ☺ Dogs naturally feel more comfortable when socializing if there is no pressure to do so. I think that is a lot like us! ☺ Well, many of us!



*Image from Dr. Sophia Yin*

How can we be respectful to new dogs we meet? The simplest way is to not come on too strong! This is very hard for us doggie people. We love to run in, say hello from up above, pat on the head, and sometimes give a hug, and a kiss. While this is the way we often socialize with our friends and family, this is likely not the way we would socialize with new people that we meet. Why then do we tend to greet strange dogs this way? We assume, because we are doggie people, and we love dogs, that all dogs love us too? As perhaps they might, once they get to know us, they too prefer a 'hand shake' greeting rather than a hug and a kiss for the first time! What does that mean? What is a 'hand shake' to a dog? I am not suggesting that you ask the dog to shake a paw, for even this may be overwhelming for a first greeting. I am suggesting an appropriate first time greeting for a strange dog. Leaning over a dog can be scary, patting on the head can also be scary. The best 'hand shake' greeting is to stop 2-3 feet away from the dog, offer a bit of a side body posture, be careful that your hand is not too high or forward, and see what your dog is saying. For a smaller dog, you may choose to bend your knees (not your waist) to get closer and more to his level. It is important not to lean over him. If the dog moves toward you (most will), you can now pat the side of his face or body, count to 3 and give him space. He will likely come forward wagging his tail and full body, or lean into you with warmth, and softness! He accepted your handshake and is asking for more! Perfect, you have a new friend! If, he moves away, looks away, or maybe gives you another 'calming signal' (blinking his eyes, licking his nose/lips, yawning, starts to pant), simply say hello from a distance and let him be. You offered your 'doggie hand shake' and he did not give you one back. If this were a person, you would quickly understand that they were not too into being to 'touchy feely' with you. The same goes for your dog! With a dog that does not wish for a hand shake today, if you see him tomorrow, and offer the same respect, he may then accept your handshake and ask for more! ☺



Understanding, listening, and respecting a dog's social needs can make all the difference in the outcome of all doggie interactions. This is also helpful in setting your own dog up for success in making doggie friends. If we help our dogs in greeting others who want to say hello, and offer space to those who do not on walks, at the dog park, vet clinic, or other, we will avoid potential doggie arguments, and fights. We will prevent our own dog from developing social fears, and teach them how to walk away when another dog says "No thank you! Not today!"

Be careful, be safe, have fun, and enjoy socializing your dog, and meeting others! Remember that not all dogs have to be friendly and be having a good day in the moment that we meet them. We do not know their history, or what they have just experienced before our meeting with them. If we follow the rules, offer a doggie hand shake, respect those who need space, and enjoy those who love to be touched and cuddled, we are guaranteed to have more doggie friends than we could ever have asked for! Now go out and make more doggie friends, the doggie safe and friendly way! Genevieve

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