



How to Interact Safely with Dogs

Dogs are complex animals that may display a variety of different behaviors in any given situation. Any dog—from your best friend at home to the stray dog on the street—will react differently, and possibly unexpectedly, to people, places and other animals.

Animal behavior can shift from moment to moment, so it is important to constantly be aware of changes in the dog's behavior and in the environment. The dog's personality plays a major role in how it will interact with, or react to, situations and people. Because there is such variation with each dog and environment, it is important to understand how to interact with dogs in as safe a manner as possible in any situation.

Approach the dog in a safe manner

Here are some basic tips for approaching a dog in a non-threatening manner:

- First and foremost, if the dog is with its owner, ask if it is OK to pet the dog before doing so.
- Before you interact with a dog, it is important to be aware of the body signals you are exhibiting.
 - Present your side to the dog—not your front—from a standing or squatting position.
 - Don't lean over the dog.
 - Let the dog come to you rather than approaching the dog.
 - Avoid direct eye contact (don't stare the dog in the eyes).
 - Extend your hand toward the dog.
 - Don't ever put your face close to the dog's face.
 - Talk in a friendly voice.

Look for signs of stress in the dog

When interacting with any dog, it is vital that you be very aware of what the dog is communicating to you. It is fairly easy to identify a dog that clearly doesn't want you to approach; it will bark, growl, tuck its tail, hide, run away or roll over onto its back. However, dogs may show more subtle signs of stress, even while you are petting them. These warning signs indicate that the dog is uncomfortable and may include:

- Ears pulled back
- Lip licking
- Paw raised
- Leaning away
- Dilated pupils
- Crouching down
- Quick head turn (toward hand)
- Jerky movements
- Lifting lip (showing canines or other teeth)
- Urinating while interacting with you
- Avoiding eye contact/looking away
- Hackles raised (hair on back of neck standing up)
- Drinking more than normal

Based on the signals dogs use to communicate, it is important to know when to back off and when it is OK to continue interacting with the dog.

- Stop petting or otherwise interacting with the dog if you notice the following:
 - A change in the dog's behavior from loose wagging postures to a tense body
 - Sudden changes in the environment (loud noises, lighting changes, another animal approaching, etc.)

Safety tips for dog owners

As a dog owner, it is your responsibility to know your dog's personality, stress signals and limits; to avoid situations that put your dog in a potentially stressful and dangerous situation; and to watch for signs of stress when encountering people, animals and situations. In addition:

- Don't encourage strangers to approach and pet your dog; instead, let your dog approach them.
- Keep your dog on a loose leash when you are in potentially stressful situations, so it can easily move away from a person or animal if it feels uncomfortable.

**For more information on dog behavior and handling, please contact the
Dumb Friends League Animal Behavior Helpline at (303) 751-5772, Ext. 1359.**

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