

## 10 Mistakes to Avoid When Greeting a New Dog

Nearly everyone makes the first mistake, it's hard not to! But how you act towards an unfamiliar dog — and its owner — goes a long way towards the new dog feeling you're 'safe' and he can trust you, and will help ensure positive meet-ups in the future.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Whether you're at the park, on a trail or just walking downtown, there's always a possibility you'll encounter a dog you're not familiar with; how you approach the dog will set the tone for the meeting
- Key behaviors you can adopt will help new dog encounters go smoothly, without any hurt feelings on the part of you, the dog or the dog's owner
- Tips such as how to establish yourself with a dog's owner and make safe physical contact with a previously unfamiliar pup go a long way toward ensuring positive meet-ups in the future

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Most dog lovers know that when approaching dogs they're not acquainted with for the first time, certain seemingly innocent moves and cues may not go over well from the dog's perspective.

As friendly and sincere as you may be with nothing but the best intentions, the thing dogs typically judge first is whether or not you respect boundaries. Greeting dogs is different than meeting people. Strangers you're introduced to usually smile, look you in the eye and reach out their hand for you to shake.

For want of a better phrase, dogs aren't like that. They prefer a little more space and restraint. If this is new information, or even if you need a quick brush-up course on dog-meeting protocol, read on.

### 10 Tips to Know When Greeting Dogs

1. **Greet the human first** — As much as you may be taken with a cute little pup or handsome canine, focus first on the human the dog is with.

Dogs seem to be able to zero in on their owners' emotional well-being, as well as body language. If the dog is OK with your interaction with his owner, perhaps he'll be more open to (later) interacting with you.

2. **Ask the dog's owner for permission** — Before approaching a dog you don't know, ask his owner's permission. When Fido establishes that your intent is good, he'll relax and regard you as "safe."

Additionally, there may be good reasons why it's not a good time for interaction. The dog may be ill and not himself, potentially making his behavior erratic, or even contagious to your dog.

3. **Avoid eye contact** — It's different for humans, particularly in the U.S. where people often pass others on the street with a smile, or even stop and converse while looking them straight in the eye.

Dogs have their own code. Dominant dogs may see your eye contact with them as a challenge or desire for dominance. Remembering this may circumvent an unpleasant situation.

4. **Don't be afraid** — Dogs sense it when someone is fearful. It can raise their natural defense mechanisms as well as their aggression. That said, try to relax. While some have the notion that dogs can "smell" fear, it's more likely that they're just good at reading peoples' body language.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, just telling yourself you're not afraid won't necessarily make it so. If you approach a dog and feel a little edgy for whatever reason, pay attention to your gut and pass by with a smile but without attempting interaction.

5. **Avoid a head-on approach** — If you can, position yourself so that you're walking or standing beside the dog rather than coming at him directly from the front. If the dog and his owner are approaching you, turning your body sideways conveys a decreased threat, from the dog's perspective.

At the same time, however, it's always good to keep your peripheral vision peeled to ascertain the dog's body posture. If he seems stiff and is facing you, you may want to keep moving along.

6. **Don't bend over the dog** — Humans are usually taller than dogs, so it may seem natural to bend over them, but this is rarely a good approach when greeting a dog who's unfamiliar with you.

Depending on the situation, you can squat down and get more on his level, at a distance that respects his space.

7. **Let them come to you** — When advancing toward an unknown dog and his owner and a "meet and greet" is imminent, walk slowly. Walking directly toward them quickly may make a dog react out of instinct, which may not have a good outcome. Dogs are usually relaxed and even friendly if they're familiar and comfortable with the person approaching them. If yours isn't a familiar face, allowing the dog to approach you first is a good rule of thumb.

8. **Offer your closed fist, palm down** — After you've spent enough time for the dog to feel comfortable in your presence, bring your slightly balled fist toward the dog's nose for him to smell rather than your open hand, fingers extended. Your fist is smaller, so it seems less threatening.

9. **Avoid touching his head or hindquarters** — When a dog sniffs your closed fist and he remains composed, relaxed and close to you, you can then pet him lightly with the back of your open hand on his shoulder, neck or chest.

Unless he's completely at ease with you, and especially if you just met him, the top of a dog's head as well as his hindquarters should remain off limits. You want to keep the dog from feeling threatened, and these are moves he may perceive as such.

10. **When a dog is done interacting, respect that** — When a dog allows you to step into his orbit, let him decide how long the "close encounter" should last. If he moves away, let him, and don't keep reaching toward him. He's allowed you to say hello, so let that suffice for your first introduction. Never reach toward a dog that has backed away from you.

You may have experienced petting a dog who suddenly whipped his head toward your hand and bumped it with his nose. That's not likely a "keep petting me" signal but just the opposite. If this ever happens, stop

doing whatever it is you're doing that the dog may not be appreciating.<sup>2</sup>

If, however, the dog has a wide-legged stance, locks eyes on you and backs up, take it as a warning and stop what you're doing immediately. It could be that the dog has, for whatever reason, found you intimidating and is getting ready to defend his territory. Then is the time to discreetly move away.

## Wise Dog Lovers Respect Boundaries

Imagine if, when meeting someone for the first time, you extended your hand only to have them walk straight up, get nose to nose with you and gaze into your eyes. Pretty disconcerting, right? That may give you an idea how dogs may feel when naive dog lovers try to approach them with a pat on the top of their head, their backside, or, worse, a hug.<sup>3</sup>

You can usually "read" what dogs are experiencing by their general demeanor and tell whether they find you a delightful human or not so much. Dogs, like people, tend to feel more comfortable when they're not on guard for situations that may require them to defend themselves or their humans. Remembering these tips may help equip you to better preempt potential pooch problems. You may even find yourself with a new friend.

### Sources and References

[Pet 360 2015](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Petful July 31, 2024](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Quick and Dirty Tips Sept. 22, 2011](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Treehugger July 21, 2021](#)

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