



# Canine

## *Social Graces*

Things dogs do that may offend other dogs

By Roxanne Hawn

Imagine you're a perfectly nice dog out for a walk. You're on leash, minding your own business, when you spot another dog barking his head off and dragging his owner toward you. Alarms go off in your head. You're scared—even though the dog is about

the same size as you are. You think, "That dog is out of control. He doesn't know the rules."

You look for an escape route, but you're trapped by your leash. Heart pounding, you send signals to the other dog that scream "Go away!" You

lick your lips, turn your head away, and keep walking.

The other owner loses his grip on the leash, freeing his dog to bomb straight for you. "Don't worry," the man yells. "He's friendly!"

The dog slams into you. He throws a front leg over your back and slobbers all over your neck. You show your teeth, but he doesn't back off. You swing your bottom into him and move away, but he pounces again. So you spin to face him, snapping and snarling. Suddenly, everyone is yelling at you, and you don't know why.

"He just wanted to play," the man says as he drags away his dog, who is still barking and straining to reach you.

### WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS BEHAVIOR?

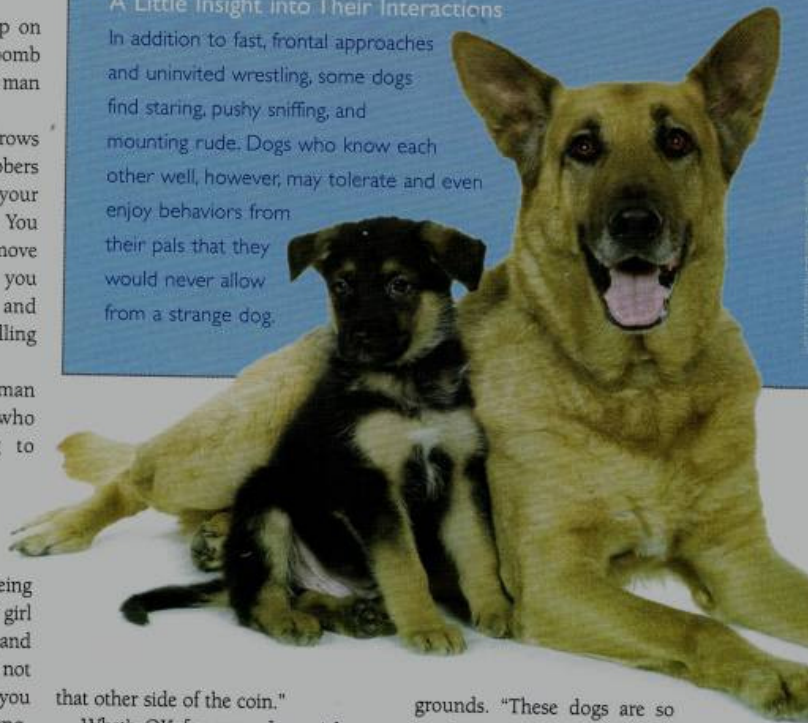
If it's hard to tell which dog was being rude, imagine the first dog is a little girl and that a strange person raced up and started hugging and kissing her. "It's not a gesture that's OK with anybody you just met on the street," explains longtime dog trainer Suzanne Clothier. It's the same, she says, with dogs. Proper social interaction deals with the use of space, the speed of entering a space, and the cues that say contact is or isn't OK.

"There is this misconception that 'Oh, well, they're dogs. They'll work it out,'" she says. "By and large, they do. However, it can go badly, and when it does, it can be unnecessarily uncomfortable."

Some dogs—and their owners—love such exuberant, determined dogs. Other dogs, however (especially shy ones or those bred for herding), may take huge offense and even develop lifelong problems after just a single bad experience. "If I had a nickel for every dog who's been horribly sensitized to other dogs to the point she was just miserable in public and needed a tremendous amount of training to get through it . . ." Clothier says. "I wish people could see

### A Little Insight into Their Interactions

In addition to fast, frontal approaches and uninvited wrestling, some dogs find staring, pushy sniffing, and mounting rude. Dogs who know each other well, however, may tolerate and even enjoy behaviors from their pals that they would never allow from a strange dog.



that other side of the coin."

What's OK for your dog might not be OK for someone else's pet. "So, if we really want to be 'dog lovers,'" Clothier says, "then we need to stop and ask what's appropriate so that we never inadvertently cause another dog distress."

### WHERE IT STARTS

Clothier has spent 30 years encouraging the revolution to positive, not punitive, dog training. Yet she wonders if training slides into permissiveness in many households, where dogs learn they get whatever they want whenever they want it, without seeking permission or first offering an appropriate behavior (such as sitting).

Sue Conklin, a dog trainer and blogger known as The Puppy Nanny, agrees and has noticed a recent increase in rude canine behavior. She points to retractable leashes, dog parks, and doggy daycares as breeding

grounds. "These dogs are so conditioned that they can go play with everybody they see," she says. "I go to the local dog park just to watch, and I see dogs jumping and barking to get inside, then being unleashed to play, which rewards them for that behavior. So, when they're on a walk and see another dog 50 feet away, the dog starts jumping and barking. Why? Because the dog has learned that that's how he gets to play with other dogs."

### HOW TO FIX IT

Always asks permission before allowing your dog to approach another. This is easier if the following training is in place:

- Train your dog to approach other dogs only with permission.
- Train your dog to sit calmly as other dogs pass by, feeding many small treats in quick succession so that

Appropriate Dog Behavior: What to Look For

Lindsay Wood, training and behavior manager for the Humane Society of Boulder Valley in Colorado, spends a lot of time managing dog-to-dog interactions. She watches for body language that shows dogs are interacting appropriately when they first meet:



- Relaxed bodies and faces on approach
- Wiggly bottoms or at least neutral tail positions (not too high, not tucked to belly)
- Curved body motion as the dogs get close
- Brief face-to-face greeting that quickly becomes an investigation of the head and rear
- Continual movement by both dogs during investigation
- Quick segue into play or an amiable parting of ways

**During play, Wood looks for these indicators that things are going well—no matter how rough the play may seem to us:**

- Activity shifts, where dogs move from one type of play (boxing, jaw wrestling, chasing, tug) to another
- Role reversal, where dogs take turns being on the bottom or being chased
- Atmosphere cues, where dogs use play bows, happy play faces, and bouncy or inefficient movement to indicate "whatever I do next is playful"

your dog focuses on you. (This works for playful dogs, but it's often used as a coping strategy for fearful ones too, so if you see a dog pulled aside, do not approach.)

- Honor dog body language, and decline or break off any matchups if either dog appears uncomfortable or responds badly. We don't

like everyone we meet, and neither do dogs.

If you'd like help training your dog, your veterinarian may recommend a trainer or animal behavior expert who is suitable for your dog and her situation.

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Ultimately, Clothier counsels us to remember that "even though our dog may be the world's biggest love bunny and wouldn't hurt a flea, other dogs may have a different background and different needs." HP

*Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer based in Golden, Colorado. She and her border collie, Lilly, enjoy agility training together.*