

**Title: Training Your Dog to Reach Others**

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Summary: Is your dog afraid of other dogs? Is meeting a dog on your walk a nightmare? Read on...

**By Kathy Diamond Davis**

Author and Trainer

Fear of other dogs is epidemic these days. At the same time, more and more people want their dogs to play happily in groups with other dogs in the name of socialization. People also expect their dogs to meet and greet other dogs they encounter on walks.

What is this experience from a dog's point of view? It's often said that dogs are social animals, the idea being that they are like the type of humans who enjoy social gatherings. This is not true for all dogs.

Dogs are pack animals. That means they form stable social units and protect territory from other dogs. This trait varies from breed to breed, which is why some dogs do okay in dog parks and others get banned. More often, puppies do okay until they start to mature. Then their natural instincts combined with bad experiences they have had with other dogs make them unable to play peacefully in the park anymore.

Dog parks are optional in keeping dogs, but the ability to behave safely around other dogs is important in many situations. Early experiences with other dogs can cost your dog this ability. In fact, bad experiences at any age can result in a dog who is too afraid of other dogs to even enjoy going for walks around other dogs who are under control.

Knowledgeable management can prevent your dog from developing this problem. Some dogs who have developed the problem can be rehabilitated if you change and let the dog learn that you can now be trusted not to put the dog in danger from other dogs.

Prevention

As with so many other aspects of handling dogs, preventing fear of other dogs is much easier than trying to rehabilitate a dog who has developed the problem. You can't judge by a young dog's reactions what experience is okay and what is stressing the dog and planting a bad seed for the future.

The effects of bad puppyhood experiences do not show up until later, because puppies lack defense drives until at or after puberty. Only then do you see much of the damage that was done to your dog by errors in raising the youngster. Any fears you see in puppyhood are even more serious, because they are likely to get worse with maturity.

Fear often leads to aggression in dogs. It depends on multiple factors in the dog's temperament whether or not this is likely to happen. It also depends on exactly how the puppy is handled, but the windows of time to do just the right handling for a specific temperament issue can be short.

If your puppy has a temperament problem such as fear or aggression, there is not one day to waste in getting the expert help of a veterinary behavior specialist. The brain develops rapidly in young creatures, and patterns become strongly set. Additionally, a dog's temperament is largely genetically determined. There is only so much improvement you can achieve over what nature and selective breeding have "hardwired" into that dog.

The right experiences and handling to raise a successful puppy are not common knowledge. If you are in a situation, such as having young children in the household or have another need for a stable temperament in your dog, consider how knowledgeable you are about the details of puppy rearing. In many cases it is much more prudent to adopt a young adult dog whose puppy experiences have been successfully endured and whose adult temperament is now evident. There are many of these dogs available, because most people don't realize a puppy can be a poor choice.

This dog adopted as an adult will love you no less than would a puppy you raised. In fact, a puppy turns into a whole other animal after puberty, a dog who requires retraining from a different perspective and forms opinions of the family members all over again! Quite literally, you may not miss a thing by missing your dog's puppyhood, except for missing the chance to mess up the dog's crucial early experiences because you don't know enough to raise the kind of dog your situation requires! There's no shame in this. Research about how to choose and raise puppies successfully is ongoing, and much has yet to be discovered. Puppy rearing is incredibly complicated.

Some things we do know about the experiences a puppy needs concerning other dogs. These experiences need to be positive. People make major errors in socializing their puppies to other dogs when they think any exposure of the puppy to other dogs is good socialization. If the puppy gets frightened by another dog, even without injury, you have the start of a problem. Add a few more such incidents, and you get a permanent fear built for the future.

Correct socialization starts by laying a foundation of controlled, safe, positive experiences for the puppy with other dogs. Find safe situations to do this with known dogs and owners and/or good puppy classes. The more positive experiences the puppy has before something untoward happens (and eventually it will: some rain does, after all, fall into every life), the better the puppy will be able to handle it.

Think about why this would be. Let's say I've never met a man from the moon before, and the first one I meet proceeds to smack me upside the head. I'm going to be wary of men from the moon. But if I have a naturally equable temperament and the next three men from the moon I meet are nice to me, I might be able to put that first bad experience into perspective. If I am a more sensitive sort, I may never be able to get it out of my mind that men from the moon are not to be trusted.

What if the first man from the moon I meet smiles at me without moving too close too quickly for my comfort? What if he then backs away from me, lowering his body to appear less threatening, and beckoning me with his body language to come nearer? Maybe it takes me awhile to do that, but when I do, he remains nice to me. He might play a game with me or give me something nice to eat. Perhaps he'll offer me something I need right then, such as a cool spot to rest, a drink of water, or other aid.

Now I'm unafraid of men from the moon, and I may think they are quite nice. Again, that depends on the basic temperament I was born with. Let's say three, ten, and eventually twenty-five more men from the moon meet me and are either extra nice or just don't bother me in any way. This happens in a variety of locations. Even if I'm not trusting by nature, at this point my belief will be that men from the moon are okay.

This is when I meet a crazy man from the moon who smacks me upside the head. What do I think now? "That man is strange!" It's no longer about him being from the moon, being a man, being a person, or about where we met. My experiences have shown me that all these things are okay. THAT man is just an aberration.

But now what if I meet a series of men from the moon in various locations who smack me upside the head? I will think things have changed, and will start fearing—possibly defending myself from—men from the moon. I might attack them before they can attack me. My temperament will determine how many such experiences it takes to bring me to this belief and the resulting behavior and what form that behavior is likely to take. Maybe I'll try to get away instead of trying to fight.

What if I only get attacked in one particular location? If I have a touchy temperament, only one experience might be needed for me to start fearing that location. If my temperament is more stable, it might take several.

Your puppy or dog does not have verbal language to help put experiences into perspective. Your dog learns by what happens. If you shape what happens to your dog, you can shape what your dog will learn—what your dog will BELIEVE.

Every single thing about your dog's experiences has potential for shaping the dog's opinions. Dogs who get frightened by black dogs often develop fear of black dogs. Dogs will develop fear of specific breeds who have frightened them. Behaviors that have been associated with scary experiences, such as a dog rushing up, can also become triggers.

One of your most powerful tools in shaping your dog's beliefs about other dogs is space. Protect the space around your dog, and let your dog see that you do this consistently—every time. Pay attention to what is going on around you and your dog. Step between your dog and an approaching dog, or turn directions so that your body blocks the other dog. Your dog gets a much better impression about other dogs if there is no yelling, hitting, or other agitated behavior. Be smooth about it. Act like you are confidently in control. Get the right expert help to learn how!

Don't wait for something to happen that gives your dog reason to fear and then react to it. The damage has been done at that point. Your best option is to prevent it from happening again. It's ideal if you can set up situations that simulate that one and do not result in the scary result. For example, if a big dog has jumped your pup or dog, find people with big dogs under good control and pass them repeatedly at a distance comfortable for your dog. Training class is a perfect place to do this.

Pass closer and closer as the dog gets more and more comfortable. Use treats to focus your dog's attention. Treats can often mimic the effect of space, because in your dog's mind it moves the other dog (and everything else except you and the food) farther away! [See Attention, Please!]

When your dog is on leash, do not allow other dogs to touch yours. Dogs need to be able to use their body language freely when interacting with other dogs. Asking a dog to do this when on leash is

dangerous and unfair. It can provoke a dog fight.

Let your dog learn by experience that it is totally safe to listen to you when on leash—and that in fact it is the thing to do. This will prevent the problem so many people have of their dogs going nuts—whether fearfully, aggressively or playfully—when out on leash and another dog comes into view. Your dog will simply learn that the other dog's presence means nothing when the leash is attached. As you train your dog to respond to cues off leash, the dog can also learn to wait for your release to go play.

To let your dog play with other dogs you have decided are safe, find a safe area and remove the leash. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss safe dog park play, and you really need to learn about that from an expert in person. Just be aware that because “everybody else is doing it” doesn't necessarily make something a good idea for you and your dog.

### Scenarios

Dog body language is complex, fast, and easy to misread. When two dogs are put together to cope with each other, they have to figure out how to get along. Some dogs will quickly take the submissive role in an attempt to avoid being attacked. Others will take a dominant role for the same reason. These tactics can be successful or not.

Keep in mind that the dogs did not choose to be in this situation: people chose it and put them into it. Holding dogs accountable for their dog-to-dog “manners” is silly! And it's unfair. Can you teach your dog how to behave around other dogs? With expert help—expert humans who have expert dogs—perhaps this can be done. It's risky, though, and should not be attempted without the right help. It can be stressful for the dogs involved.

Dogs who live together have the opportunity to form a stable relationship, but this will only work if they are basically compatible and are managed properly. Growing up together is absolutely no guarantee they will get along when they begin to mature. If one of your dogs is afraid of one or more of the others, that compatibility may be lacking or you may need to change how you manage your dogs. Consult a veterinary behavior specialist before there are injuries.

Dogs your dog meets regularly in a neutral setting can become friends—or enemies. The relationship can shift as they mature. Dogs are the victims of their instincts when it comes to relating to other dogs. It's up to the humans not to put incompatible dogs together. It is never the fault of the dogs. They don't have a choice.

The sizes and sexes of the dogs matter, as do certain aspects of their temperaments such as terrier gameness. Same sex dogs have to choose a pack order unless it is totally clear to both of them that the exchange is strictly neutral. People who foster dogs do better if they keep the foster dogs clearly divided in important ways from the home dogs. The dogs are capable of realizing the foster dogs are not staying, if a good routine is always followed in how these dogs are managed. It takes enormous stress off the home dogs to do this.

When one dog is much larger than the other, a fight can quickly kill the small one. Dogs don't murder each other. They are not capable of intending or understanding such an action. They simply act on instinct. But it's hard for people to get over it.

With a big size difference it isn't even safe to let dogs play together, because of the risk of accidental injury to the small one. Dogs have died when much larger dogs have simply run into them. Broken bones are common. The little dogs know they are at risk, and can become fearful and even aggressive as a result. Tiny terriers often get themselves killed by big dogs when their gameness causes them to provoke the big dogs.

Pain is one reason for some cases of dogs fearing other dogs. Hip dysplasia, damaged knee ligaments, spinal problems and other things that hurt from movement are common in dogs. The pain impairs a dog's ability to do the body language needed for interacting with other dogs. The pain also causes the dog to become self protective. Body movement is how a dog talks, and this dog is at a huge disadvantage. The result can be fear and/or fights. The solution is to protect this dog from having to interact with other dogs where there would be reason for the dog to fear being hurt.

### Rehabilitation

It is not always possible to rehabilitate a dog who has developed a fear of other dogs, but with expert work (get the right help to learn the moves), you can at least make it better. There are two important reasons to do this. One is that it relieves some stress on your dog around other dogs, such as at the veterinarian's office or necessary trips outside to eliminate in situations without your own fenced yard. You may never be able to get the dog to the point of enjoying recreation around other dogs, and if this is the case, it wouldn't be fair to put the dog unnecessarily into such situations.

Another reason for rehabilitating fear of other dogs as much as you can is that fear tends to spread. Not only does it spread to self-protective aggression in many dogs when they feel cornered, but it spreads to other things. A dog who starts off with fear of other dogs may become afraid of being home without you, afraid of loud noises, afraid of people (especially people like those who were with the scary dogs), and other things. The dog's quality of life and your own can be seriously affected.

Structured experiences around other dogs are key to helping alleviate this fear. A well-run training class where dogs are kept under control is the perfect place. Get the help of a veterinary behavior specialist to learn how to use a head halter if your dog has reached the point of aggression. Also get the specialist's help with timing and technique for administering treats and other rewards. Learn the principles and the moves privately before trying them in class when the instructor will have other students and not be able to focus on you. This will take many more positive experiences to rehabilitate once a problem has developed than it would have taken to do it before the dog got frightened by other dogs. But it is time and effort well spent.

### Being Good to Our Dogs

If your dog has developed a fear of other dogs, don't let another day pass without changing how you manage and handle your dog. Find the expert help and the structured situations needed to give your dog faith in you as a leader who guides the pack safely.

Many dogs have this fear start when an unthinking dog owner allows a dog to go rushing up to another dog. Don't be this thoughtless person. Keep your dog out of other dogs' spaces unless the situation is appropriate for dogs to interact and the other dog owner agrees.

Fear of other dogs is actually contagious. One dog gets frightened by bad experiences and becomes aggressive in self protection. That dog frightens other dogs, who then become aggressive toward

other dogs and pass the problem on to yet more dogs. None of this is the fault of the dogs. We need to be good and faithful leaders to our dogs. Your dog will adore you for it.

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'Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others'

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