

BOUND ANGELS

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Neutral vs. Friendly Dogs

One of the most common things we strive to do is to make sure our dogs are friendly towards people and other dogs: we do this by bringing them around other dogs, dog parks, meeting lots of people and children - we call this socializing. But there are inherent risks involved with this.

Although we never consider the likelihood that all of this effort might backfire, it can. I'd like to shed some light on it here. The reason that this is a problem will become evident shortly.

A dog that sees all people and all other dogs as a source of something good is one of the best things we can do for him, unless it's not. There are dogs that are not friendly and people that are afraid of dogs. If your dog is trained to (or allowed to) run up to, and play with, all dogs - what happens when he runs up to the dog that is dog aggressive? We should teach our dogs never to approach other dogs unless we say it's ok. We do this to protect our dog.

There are plenty of dog-aggressive dogs out there, and they have a right to live, provided their owners contain them. In order to afford them this right, we need to take responsibility with our dogs and that involves being certain that our dogs are friendly, but more importantly, that they are trained **NOT** to run up to *just any other dog*. We should have our dogs contained (on leash) and ask the other person if their dog *is* friendly. If their dog is friendly, we can have the dogs meet, observe them for a moment and then, if all is ok, allow them to play. This is my issue with dog parks: people just walk in, unleash their dogs and let them go. The same goes for dogs hiking and walking off leash. *All is good, until it's not*. It only takes one dog aggressive dog to ruin your dog, especially if your dog is young. The impression a serious dog attack makes on a dog is unforgettable and can oftentimes lead your dog to becoming dog aggressive.

It is my belief that all dogs should be trained to be ok with other dogs. This isn't impossible, but it takes work. We do this through proper introductions, and more importantly, by making sure that every experience with another dog is a good one. I use controlled environments; dogs I know, dogs that belong to friends, or dogs I've personally trained. These dogs are allowed to interact with my dog. If I have even the slightest doubt, the answer is no. Furthermore, I make certain that I am the most interesting thing to my dog, and also that I can control the situation at all times. I do this by teaching my dog that when he comes back to me he gets treats or a toy to play with. I

also select which dog my dog meets, when and for how long. The decision to meet another dog is made by me, and only me. If a dog runs up to my dog off leash, I do my best to keep them from meeting.

My dog doesn't need to meet every dog, he doesn't need to play with every other dog, he doesn't need to be friends with every other dog – he is my dog, and he needs to be safe. I give him all he needs in the line of food, shelter, and mental & physical stimuli. People who think their dogs need to go to the dog park and run around every day are lazy and kidding themselves. If you have a group of friends that have a stable group of dogs and your dog plays with them – great. Otherwise, you are setting your dog up for failure.

When dogs first meet they will strive for structure. Since not every dog is stable, protect your dog and assume that other dogs are NOT ok. Don't start off with the pie-eyed, optimistic impression that all dogs are good! Protect your dog from the mental and physical trauma of a bad experience. Your dog should be able to walk-by other dogs and not engage them. Your dog should look to you for direction and permission, and most importantly, your dog should listen to you even when he is playing with other dogs. If he doesn't, you may need to step in and remind him that YOU are in charge. That reminder is something that will save his life.

People who train their dogs to run up to, and meet, every person are also setting their dogs up for failure. This usually starts out as puppy training; allowing every person to meet your dog and handle your dog. There are inherent flaws in this concept. First and foremost, you don't know how the other person will play with your dog and if they are familiar with handling dogs. If a puppy is very high drive and the person playing with him doesn't know how to stop his drive once it gets going, they will become upset with your puppy and think he is aggressive. The notion seems to be that the more people your puppy meets, the better adjusted he will be. This is incorrect: the more people your dog meets in a good experience, the better adjusted your dog will be. Furthermore, as I stated above, your dog should always look to you first and foremost. There are people who don't like dogs or are afraid of them. These people also have a right to co-exist with us. In order to do this, we have to be able to keep our dogs contained.

If your dog playfully runs up to a stranger and this person is afraid of dogs, he may yell, run or try to hit your dog because of his fear. This sends a negative message to your dog. Also, if your dog runs up to small children or frail older people, he can knock them down and hurt them. Your dog should look to you for permission and then act on that. If you say it's ok, then it's ok. He should be trained to be calm and neutral. This is hard to do with puppies, so we control their environment. We only set our dogs up for success; we don't knowingly allow our dogs to fail.

Friendly dogs are oftentimes set up for failure and suffer the consequences of a cruel world. Our dogs should be friendly to that which will bring them no harm – US. Our dogs should be neutral to other things. If your dog looks to everything as neutral, it is easy to then allow him to express his friendliness toward that which we find safe: another dog or another person.

Dogs are creatures that strive for structure, that structure comes from us. The relationship between you and your dog is the most important thing in his life. Your dog doesn't necessarily need to see other people as a good thing; instead we strive for neutrality. Do this through controlling who your dog meets. If your dog is a bit shy, make yourself the most important thing in the picture. Meeting other people should be rewarded by you, not by the other people. The old notion of having a stranger give your dog treats if your dog is afraid of that stranger is a bad idea.

If your dog is afraid of someone, and that someone has something he really wants, it gives a mixed message to your dog. Instead, I give my dog treats when he is in front of a person that makes him nervous. Therefore "I" make the other person ok. By infusing this structure, (*ME* making the other person OK), everything remains balanced in the dog's mind. There is no confusion; confusion is a bad thing in a dog's mind.

Eventually you will see your dog become more and more at ease, at which point you can have the stranger drop some treats in front of your dog – and eventually (and that might be a bit down the road) hand your dog a treat. There is no reason to FORCE your dog to like someone he doesn't like or know. There is great benefit in teaching your dog that others mean him no harm; this comes through training that is fair. *YOU* make everything OK to your dog – *YOU*, not the other person.

The key thing to remember is that you are your dog's entire world, take this responsibility seriously. Everything should revolve around you. Your dog should see you as his world and you should be there for him. If your dog is afraid, take that seriously and protect your dog. Don't push your dog into a situation that he is afraid of. Take your time with your dog and build his confidence. A strong confident dog is a stable dog.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:
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