

Meeting Fearful Dogs Safely

By Sherry Woodard

When meeting new dogs, always use respect, caution, and attentive awareness. Think in terms of learning the dog's language. Be aware of your speed while approaching any dog you don't know – slow your pace and use a gentle tone as you approach.

If you know the dog is shy or fearful, change your body language. Approach toward the side of the dog, not toward his head, and avoid direct eye contact. Watch the dog out of the corner of your eye for signs of fear or aggression, such as:

- Body that is still or frozen
- Hackles are up
- Looking away or lowering of the head while still sitting up, or raising the head way up while looking away
- Staring at you (if a defensive dog stares into your eyes, look away – to show respect and for your own safety)
- Growling
- Wrinkling of the lips without teeth showing
- Snarling with teeth showing



If the dog is snapping or lunging, proceed with extreme caution or find someone with more experience to help you. When you are close, begin to make your body “smaller.” Lower the shoulder that is closest to the dog. Start turning so that by the time you are beside the dog, you are almost facing away (but don't have your back turned completely to the dog).

Next, bend down next to the dog. (Do not bend down if the dog is snapping or lunging.) Keep your hands to yourself and give the dog a few seconds to sniff you or try to avoid you. Glance at the dog, but avoid extended eye contact. If the dog has not moved away, stay where you are and try to think about the message you are giving to the dog. Building a relationship with each dog you meet will require patience and a time commitment. I talk to the dogs when I am meeting them; if they are defensive, I tell them gently that I am not a threat. I tell them about Best Friends, about Dogtown.

I just keep talking as I try to get them to go for a walk with me. I loop a lead over the dog's head (even if he is snapping or lunging). I don't ever try to grab a defensive dog's collar to clip on a lead. Once the loop is around the dog's neck, I move away and wait to see if the dog will join me. If he does not walk, I wait; if he does walk, I just walk with him. The simple act of moving helps many dogs to relax, since they feel less like they are being cornered.

As we walk, I watch his body language and allow him to stop, sniff, eliminate – whatever he wants to do. If he panics, I stop in my tracks and, as soon as he stops flailing about, I bend down and wait for him to realize he is okay. A walk can take 10 minutes or an hour. The goal is for the dog to begin to feel better about being with me (i.e., the relationship begins). I don't normally use treats during my introductions, but you can if you want to.

After that first walk, a dog will often greet me with less fear the next time she sees me coming. She'll be more willing to move toward me and walk away with me. Most dogs I meet who act defensively at first are still willing to have a relationship; as mentioned above, it just takes patience and time. You will find that the rewards of a relationship with a dog are well worth the investment.

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: Dog Body Language
Staying Safe Around Dogs