

“It’s OK, My Dog is Friendly”

Today’s article is going to be about one of my pet peeves. We live in an area where we have a lovely ravine behind our home. It stretches for quite a distance. There’s lots of green space and it’s quite beautiful. I walk my dogs through that area every day, and sometimes twice a day. Even though there’s lots of space, my dogs are always on leash. They’re either on a regular leash or a long line.

As a dog trainer and a dog lover, one of the things that drives me crazy are people that allow their dog off leash in areas that are not designated off-leash parks. I come across this time and time again in the green space area where I walk our dogs. Many dogs do not know how to meet and greet properly, and this is where situations can become dangerous and even turn ugly. Some dogs are more tolerant of others, but many are not.

Often people who have their dog off leash will say “it’s okay, my dog is friendly”. That’s fine, but that doesn’t mean that my dog is friendly. If a dog goes running right up into Star’s face, there’s a good chance she’ll tell them to back off. And she’s right, because that’s simply not appropriate, in fact, it’s downright rude. Imagine a stranger coming right up into your face. How would you feel?

Appropriate greetings between dogs that are unfamiliar with each other starts with them greeting each other cautiously. The body language is often not relaxed as each dog is observing the response of the other dog. They then meet nose to nose slowly not making direct eye contact. They only spend 3 to 5 seconds at the face area and then move to the rear for 10 – 15 seconds. After that, they decide if they are going to move on, do nothing and just chill with the other dog, offer a play bow and see if it’s reciprocated or decide they don’t like the dog and react either lunging, growling, snapping or barking. A dog that runs straight up to your dog without going through the preliminary steps is likely to be greeted with a growl, snap or bark.

Some dogs are very much like introverts. We have all known people who are very uncomfortable at a party where they hardly know anyone. You may be one of them. You try to start a conversation with someone you don’t know (or hope no one tries to start a conversation with you) and you get stuck. You have no idea what to say next. Or you don’t know how to end the conversation so you can leave. It’s a very uncomfortable and awkward feeling.

This can also happen to dogs. They meet a new dog and sniff noses and then one of them gets stuck and doesn’t move to the rear. Or they spend too much time at the rear. Star had to learn by watching other dogs how to meet and greet appropriately. When she was young, she’d just jump into their faces – very bad manners indeed. Now she won’t tolerate anyone that does that to her.

My dogs do not meet and greet every dog they meet on our walks, for the very reason that some dogs don't do it appropriately and I know it won't be a pleasant experience for either dog. People often think that because dogs are social creatures, they need to meet every dog they see. But that's not the case. People are social beings too. But do we meet and greet everyone we see on the street? Of course not. In fact, there may be some people we have no interest in meeting or purposely avoid. So why do we think our dogs should meet every dog they see?

I completely understand if you want to give your dog freedom by letting them off leash but do it where dogs are allowed to run off leash. Depending on where you live, the fine for allowing your dog off leash in a non-designated area can result in fines upwards of \$200 per dog. If you're trying to teach your dog to recall (come when called), then put them on a 15 or 30 foot long-line. I use these on our dogs. The great thing about long lines is that most bylaws don't stipulate a maximum length of leash. It only states that dogs must be leashed. At least if your dog is on a long line and they start running towards a dog that may not appreciate it, you can quickly get your dog back to you and out of harms way.

If your dog doesn't come back to you each and every time you call them, they are not ready to be allowed off leash, especially if you can't call them away from another dog. More importantly, you may be putting your own dog at risk by allowing them that freedom.