



Remedial Dog-Dog Skills

by
LAURA GARBER, CPDT-KA, CC, FFCP, CBC

Some dogs may be socially curious about other dogs but, having missed an essential education in dog socialization during their puppyhood, they may lack the social skills, play behaviors, and an understanding of dog body language that will help them safely navigate play interactions. For these dogs, we may want to offer them some remedial social interactions. Here are some steps we can take to safely make some initial introductions and potentially build some social skills...



GETTING STARTED

You will need a helper dog; choose one who is calm, non-reactive, and socially skillful. Start with both dogs on leash and at a distance from each other such that our learner dog is alert to the other dog but not reactive. Perhaps this is across the street from each other or, for dogs who need more distance, go to a field or park where they can have more space between them.

PARALLEL WALKING

With the dogs facing in the same direction, walk them in parallel down the street or across the field from each other. By walking in the same direction, the dogs are not giving each other direct eye contact or a frontal body orientation. Keep the helper dog from looking at the learner dog, as eye contact can be threatening. Use treats, if necessary, to accomplish this. When you get to the end of the street or the field, turn around and walk the dogs back, continuing in parallel and at the distance. As the learner dog calms down and becomes less aroused, you can gradually drift a little closer to each other, always remaining in a parallel orientation. Repeat this over and over, drifting gradually ever closer.

DRAFTING

When the two dogs have drifted a bit closer, perhaps 10-15 feet apart, walk the helper dog ahead and allow the learner dog to follow behind, but *not* close. Start at no closer than 10 feet. Have them walk along in single file like this; the learner dog is getting the scent of the helper dog as it wafts back to him. It's a little like the way one bicycle drafts in the airstream behind another.

If the learner dog seems curious without being overly aroused, allow him to catch up a bit to the helper dog in front and, if you feel comfortable, allow him to get a quick sniff of the helper dog's butt. After a second or two of sniffing, say "OK, let's go!" and turn and walk away in the other direction.

(Make sure that the helper dog continues facing forward as he walks so that he doesn't turn around to look at the learner dog, as the learner dog may find this threatening. Use a treat as a lure if necessary.)

You can repeat this process by turning the learner back around and falling back into step 10 feet behind the helper dog, and then allowing him to catch up and get another sniff. Only allow the sniff to last a second or two.

WALKING TOGETHER

If the butt sniffing phase has gone well, return to parallel walking and allow them to drift closer so that they are walking side by side but with a few feet between them. Walk along this way and now allow them to enjoy the environment in tandem. One may sniff a tree and the other may want to join in. Watch their behavior to see that they are remaining calm and that the learner is not hard-staring the helper dog or getting overly aroused.

MAKING FRIENDS

Rome wasn't built in a day and likely this friendship won't be either. It is well worth it to go slow. Perhaps the first session will just be parallel walking at a distance, with only slight gradual gains. Make a date with the same helper dog to meet again, starting at the original distance. You will likely make gains more quickly this time.

Take it slow. Don't force closer interactions until the learner dog is ready, making sure all along that the helper dog remains comfortable and unbothered as well. Slow and steady wins this race!