

RESPECT THE SIGNS OF AVOIDANCE

Whether you are meeting a dog for the first time or you are introducing your own dog to a new person, look for signs of avoidance, including turning away, walking away, or even refusing to engage. Failing to respect these signs and forcing the interaction increases the risk that the dog could escalate to aggressive displays, like growling and barking, or aggressive behaviors like biting.

Most people have heard the term "fight or flight" when talking about how animals handle a threat. "Flight" is a form of avoidance. If the dog can avoid the perceived threat, there is no need to escalate to more physical forms of defense.

However, when we take away that freedom, "fight" is a valid option in their repertoire of self-defense, just as it is for all animals. Since dogs aren't effective at pushing, slapping, or using harshly-worded warnings, they are left with two options - either stay still or use teeth to get the perceived threat to back off.

There is no such thing as a dog that won't bite IF they feel threatened.

What each dog perceives as a threat will vary with their temperament and learning history. Some dogs love the vet, some dogs have only had negative experiences. Some dogs enjoy being pet by strangers, some dogs need to get to know the person for a while before they move to second base.

When meeting a new dog, always wait for the dog to approach you. If he or she chooses not to approach, then keep your hands to yourself. Petting a dog is a privilege, not a right.

By respecting their choice, the dog may start come around. If they do, don't reach out to pet them immediately. Let them sniff you (keep your hands to yourself, they can sniff your shoe, leg, or hand right where it is) and then see what they do. If they show continued interest, then go for a gentle chin or chest rub. If not, or if they move away, that's okay. It's not personal.

When meeting someone new, give your dog the choice to approach or avoid. It is far better to have a stranger think you rude or over-protective (and then forget you 5 minutes later), than to have your names forever linked on a bite report.

Never expect strangers to behave appropriately around your dog. Remember, if your dog bites, it doesn't matter whether the person leaned, reached, stared, hugged. Legally and financially, you are responsible. And your dog could pay the ultimate price.

Listen to the dog. Respect the signs of avoidance.

