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Do Dogs Need Doggy Friends?

In the first photo (left), Instructor Tasheena Housman is introducing her new Bichon Frise puppy, Kevlar, to Kathy Lang's older Belgian Sheepdog, Tory, who has proven to be good with puppies and small dogs. Notice the body language in the Bichon puppy; she's not too sure about the big black dog. Their first meetings were always well controlled until Kevlar was comfortable interacting with Tory when he was on a down stay. As Kevlar grew more comfortable, they were eventually allowed to run and play with supervision.

In the second photo (right), Tasheena's older Bichon, Liberty, is mirroring the body language offered by Kathy's younger Belgian, Falyn. Liberty has grown up playing with Tory, so when she was presented with a wild, high energy, teenage Falyn, she knew how to interact. In this photo, Falyn had been trying to get Liberty to play (notice Falyn is on leash), but was being too rough with Liberty, so Falyn offered softer body language as a way of showing respect to her elder (even though Liberty is much smaller). When Falyn rolled on her side (on her own),

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Liberty walked over and laid down next to her. Notice Falyn's appeasing body language compared with Liberty's relaxed expression.

When students ask us if their dogs should be allowed to play with other dogs, our reply is "Well, it depends..." followed by "It's really not necessary for dogs to have dog friends. Some dogs are actually happier without them, and some dogs, due to their backgrounds, are really never going to be suitable playmates for other dogs."

Dog body language is fascinating, and when two dogs know how to "talk dog" it's great to let them play and have doggy friends. However, not all dogs know how to give subtle body language signals; and not all dogs know how to receive them. This inability to communicate can result in aggression, fear and other issues.

Our staff members only allow their personal dogs to play with dogs they have been introduced to in this controlled manner. (We're not fans of dog parks, where dogs with poor body language skills may be allowed to harass or frighten other dogs.) We make sure our puppies and softer dogs learn confidence from older, calmer dogs before being exposed to uppity teenagers. Our more dominant and pushy dogs must first learn self-control and patience before interacting with fearful puppies and dogs.

The key to a successful doggy friendship is balance. Both dogs must enjoy the interaction and understand when it's time to play, when it's time to relax and when one or the other wants to be left alone.

In our Puppy Manners classes we are careful to match puppies with playmates who are appropriate in size and temperament. We allow them to play with supervision and control. We want to make sure every puppy has a good experience and we help their owners understand how to introduce their puppies to the proper playmates outside of class.



Walker, meet Breeze! Breeze, meet the puppies!

Whether you're getting a new puppy, adopting an adult rescue dog or hoping to introduce your dog to a new doggy friend, we have tips to make the introductions successful.

In the top left photo, adult Belgian Sheepdog, Walker, is meeting the young Belgian Tervuren, Breeze, for the first time. Although he's sitting next to the puppy, his ears show that he's feeling a bit stressed because he doesn't have much experience with puppies. In the top right photo, the older Belgian Tervuren, Breeze, is meeting three Belgian Sheepdog puppies for the first time. Notice her playful body language and how only one of the puppies is greeting her directly.

Allowing dogs to get to know one another through an exercise pen or baby gate is one way to conduct introductions. Owners can step back and observe, taking their emotions out of the mix.

On-leash introductions are okay if both owners stay neutral. It also helps if the dogs perform a sit for greeting prior to being allowed to interact. During this Sit Stay while owners observe and chat several feet apart, the dogs are able to see one another in close proximity and the handlers can observe body language. Anything deemed inappropriate can be managed at that time.

Sometimes the best introductions occur when one dog is on leash and the other is off-leash. Ideally the off-leash dog should be well trained to come when called and stay if this introduction gets out-of-hand.

When dogs are allowed together off-leash in the beginning, it should be in a relatively small area (as opposed to a huge yard where they might run off and get into trouble) with no objects that might cause one dog to become possessive (such as toys, treats, dog beds, etc.). Owners should not hover over the dogs, but they should watch for stress signals in one or both dogs. Extreme avoidance of the other dog, ears that are pinned back and low growling can signal trouble unless the other dog backs off and gives calming signals.

In a perfect world, both dogs will work things out with minimal human intervention; however, it's best to supervise all interactions for the first several weeks (if not months). In the case of a new addition to the household, it helps to give dogs individual time. When dogs spend too much time together they may get frustrated with one another, especially if there's an extreme difference in age, energy level or size.

Obedience training with all the dogs involved is also helpful; it helps the dogs realize their "pack" has a leader. Obedience commands can help prevent jealousy (all dogs have to obey commands to earn privileges) and potential aggression. If you need assistance with doggy introductions or multi-dog households, we are available for private lessons.

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