



How Do I Socialize My Dog Who Isn't Very Social?

Not all dogs enjoy interacting with other dogs. We receive many inquiries from owners who have dogs who aren't so good with other dogs. The problem behaviors are varied but fall into several common categories:

- Dogs who react poorly toward other dogs when on a leash
- Dogs who are curious of other dogs, but things go south after the first sniff
- Dogs who have been expelled from a dog day care due to fighting or bullying
- Dogs who get into disagreements or fights at the dog park
- Dogs who are too excited or too playful with other dogs
- Dogs who are aloof with other dogs or are not playful
- Dogs who just simply don't like other dogs or who prefer people to dogs

Owners usually contact us because they have been told or believe that their dogs just need more socialization. More interaction with other dogs should make this better, right? Well, not entirely!

In order for a trainer/behavior expert to observe your dogs' aggressive behavior toward other dogs, you would need to "set up" another dog. That is unfair and unsafe, both for your dog and for the other dog(s). Other dogs should not have this sort of behavior thrust on them. Most group dog environments simply aren't appropriate or even possible to work behavior modification.

At a dog park, the area is too large and multi-dynamic to have control over your dog's behavior. Often, owners are punishing the wrong behaviors in these environments. There are some conflicting interactions that necessitate your dog to react and that may be appropriate! But in other situations, it isn't appropriate. Also, it isn't fair to put your dog into these complicated social situations and try to train him. The feedback from you and the dynamics of the other dogs are too much to sort through.

At a dog day care, the staff isn't able to work your dog's behavior. They have a group to manage and keep safe. Any work you do with your dog on your own won't generalize to the day care. What we mean is that if dogs learn something in one situation, it doesn't automatically apply to all situations. Dogs need to already have appropriate behavior to be in these types of situations. Dog day cares are not intended nor do they function as a rehabilitation place for dog behavior.

So, what should an owner do to help or work with these dogs? First, let me say that you don't have to do anything! It is perfectly OK for dogs to not be social as long as you are happy with them in your home! There are plenty of ways to exercise your dog even if he is dog reactive on the leash. Playtime is exercise! Swimming, playing ball in the yard,

treadmills, and mobile treadmill services are a great way to merely exercise your dog. There are also many “brain games” or enrichment activities to keep your dog thinking, learning, and mentally stimulated. You don’t have to try to change your dog just because your guilt tells you to or because someone or an expert tells you to socialize your dog.

Socialization is about creating social bonds and learning to negotiate social situations. That can cause a lot of conflict for some dogs. The concept of interacting with other dogs may be too much to ask. If we force these dogs into stressful social situations, we aren’t actually socializing them. Instead, we are creating negative experiences.

For dogs that are leash reactive or aggressive on leash when seeing other dogs, you can work on a behavior modification program that teaches your dogs to take it down a notch and be calmer. The goal in this situation is to help your dog to become neutral toward other dogs. On the continuum of aggressive to friendly, neutral is a great midpoint! Neutral is closer to friendly than aggressive so we need to work across the continuum systematically. If your dog can learn to be calmer and more neutral, then it may be appropriate to see if your dog wants to learn to interact with dogs on a social level. The key here is listening to your dog. Not all dogs prefer the company of other dogs.

For dogs that seem curious about other dogs but react aggressively or defensively a few seconds into the interaction, go more slowly. Institute a two second rule with appropriate dogs in which you only allow sniffing or greeting for a total of two seconds and then jolly your dog away from that dog and back to you. Then try another two seconds, etc. Sometimes, these dogs just need a protracted greeting ritual and for things to go slowly to create some predictability from one dog to the other. It may even take several times of introducing and going through the protracted greeting ritual. Often, these dogs are more introverted (See our article - Is my dog an extrovert or an introvert) and prefer to have a few close friends versus a dynamic group setting.

For dogs who have been expelled from a dog care or a dog park for bullying or fighting, keep your dogs out of those dynamics. Your dog isn’t going to become polite and considerate with more training. If exercise is what they need, you can address that. If stimulation is what they need, you can address that. If you just want them to be around other dogs and socializing, remember, they are practicing poor behavior at another dog’s expense. This is not an appropriate environment for these dogs.

For dogs who are too excitable, too playful, or play at the expense of other dogs, dog parks and dog day cares are not appropriate for them either. Even though they aren’t aggressive, these dogs are unrelenting and frustrating to other dogs. A protocol aimed at teaching these dogs to not always be a participant but to be a neutral observer is invaluable. You will need a behavior professional to help you create and carry out this protocol because it must be created differently based on the needs of each individual dog.

For aloof, non-playful dogs, they would prefer to be around other dogs that don't interactively play. These dogs tend to be introverted as well and tend to prefer parallel activities with other dogs. This means that the dogs aren't doing things together, they are merely in the same place at the same time doing their own thing. Not all dogs want to play so we must consider the individual preferences of the dogs we have.

For dogs who simply don't like other dogs, find other ways to exercise and enrich them. Dog interaction needs to be something that dogs like, not something they find aversive. It isn't fair to expect dogs to like other dogs, play with other dogs, or be comfortable in these dynamic group settings. It is possible for some dogs who don't like other dogs to socialize with one, well-matched dog. Meaning, they may be able to form some level of an attachment bond with another dog even if that attachment bond is merely a roommate situation consisting of polite tolerance and accommodation.

Please remember, not all dogs will like or be good with other dogs. Some dogs just play too inappropriately to allow them to do so. Some dogs just want to do their own thing and prefer people to dogs. Don't feel socially pressured or guilted into believing that your dog 'just needs more socialization'. Ask a behavior professional if your dog needs socialization, training, or behavior protocols. Finally, if any of the above situations hit home with you and your dog, remember this is about doing what is best for your dog. Your dog is the only one who can decide how much he likes other dogs.