



Ask the Expert

BREANNE TABBERT

Breanne Tabbert is the animal behavior specialist at the Champaign County Humane Society. To submit your questions, email Breanne@cuhumane.org

Q: Hi Breanne! Now that the weather is finally nice, I've been taking my dog on longer walks—and it feels like everyone else in the neighborhood is doing the same. My dog gets so wiggly and excited and tries to pull me toward other dogs. Is it okay to let them meet? She just wants to say hi!

A: Hi there! I know how sweet that excitement can look, but I generally don't recommend on-leash greetings with unfamiliar dogs. Even if your dog is friendly, you can't be sure how the other dog feels about meeting another dog while restrained. Leashes change the way dogs communicate. When dogs are tethered, they lose the

ability to move freely, create space, and approach naturally. If your dog is pulling forward, even out of excitement, her posture can appear tense or threatening to another dog. What starts as an eager "hello" can quickly turn stressful for one or both dogs.

Q: What if it's my friend's dog? I've met the dog many times before, but my dog hasn't. I'd love for us to enjoy the warm weather together and let the dogs walk as buddies.

A: This presents a great opportunity to introduce the two dogs thoughtfully. Instead of walking them towards each other for a nose-to-nose greeting (which is not natural for dogs), start with parallel walking in a spacious area like a park. Begin far enough apart that both dogs can notice each other without pulling or becoming overly aroused.

Your dog should still be able to respond to you and take treats.

If you're in a neighborhood, you can walk in the same direction on opposite sides of the street. Each time your dog notices the other dog, calmly reward her with a high-value treat. This helps build a positive association while keeping arousal levels manageable.

Over multiple walks, gradually decrease the distance between the dogs as long as they remain relaxed. When they're able to walk comfortably side by side, you can allow a brief, loose-leash sniff. Keep initial greetings short—about three to five seconds—then cheerfully call them apart. Short, successful interactions build far more trust than long, intense ones.

Q: That makes sense. But what if I can't get my dog's attention, no matter how far away we are? She has played with other dogs in my yard before, so why does the leash make such a difference?

A: It sounds like your dog may be experiencing some big emotions on leash. It could be a mix of excitement, frustration, physical discomfort, or even fear. Off leash, dogs can move in arcs, pause, retreat, and communicate more naturally. On leash, those options disappear, and that can amplify excitement or anxiety.

To help, I often recommend practicing the “engage–disengage” game during walks. The idea is simple: when your dog notices another dog, you mark the moment (i.e. say their name or click if you're clicker training) and reward them for turning their attention back to you. Over time, your dog learns that

seeing another dog predicts something positive—and that calmly checking in with you is rewarding. With consistency, many dogs begin to automatically look to their handler instead of lunging at or staring at the other dog.

Much like humans, dog sociability lies on a spectrum and not all dogs want to meet and engage with every dog they see. Navigating walks can take patience and careful behavior work. With the right strategies, many dogs and their people can make meaningful progress.

For detailed, step-by-step guidance on this exercise, you can visit:

<https://clickertraining.com/reducing-leash-reactivity-the-engage-disengage-game/>



BREANNE TABBERT has done it all in her decade-plus career at CCHS. With a Bachelor's in Animal Sciences from U of I, she started her shelter career with the animal care team and has been known to assist across all CCHS departments. When she isn't working with shelter pets, she enjoys getting lost in a good book, puppy snuggles with her dog, Piper, and running half marathons at DisneyWorld.