

Introducing Your New Dog to Your Resident Dog

You have fallen in love with a sweet, affectionate dog at the shelter, and want to adopt him and welcome him into your family. But what will your loyal, lovable dog at home think about this new arrangement? You can help make the transition successful by first understanding how dogs establish themselves in the family structure, and by learning how to read and respect dog communication signals.

Understanding Canine Social Structure and Dominance Ranking in Your Home

Dogs are pack animals that form social structures within their groups. This is called a dominance hierarchy. If you have a dog in your home right now, there is a social structure already in place. Your current dog is most likely comfortable recognizing you as the head of the pack and has positioned himself happily under your leadership.

He considers his home as his “territory.” Where he eats, where he sleeps, and even the amount of attention he receives from you is important to him and helps him identify where he ranks in your family. When a new pet, especially a new dog, comes into the home, there is an adjustment period when both the new dog and the resident dog must establish themselves somewhere in this new social structure. Either your resident dog will view the newcomer as a welcomed playmate and member of his pack, or he may find him threatening, invading his space and his family. This can be a confusing time for both dogs. Because of this, a proper introduction between your new pet and current pet is critical.

Proper Introduction

Location of Introduction - Your new dog and your current dog should be introduced at the shelter or a quiet location that both dogs are unfamiliar with. This provides a neutral ground that neither dog could view as his own territory.

Handling - A separate person should handle each dog, with both dogs on leashes at all times. The introduction should be broken up into several short segments, or encounters. Keep it short and sweet. Introductions can be stressful and each dog may need time to unwind.

Make it a positive experience - The goal is to show both dogs that something positive happens every time they interact. Use treats, plenty of praise, and speak in a happy, cheery voice. Never threaten, yell, or use physical punishment. Allow the dogs to meet, sniff and greet, with lots of cheerful encouragement. Slowly separate. Ask the dogs to perform a “sit”, and then give a treat. Keep it positive. Slowly reintroduce the dogs again. The idea is to make sure neither dog feels threatened or overwhelmed.

Reading Dog Communication Signals - Dogs communicate with each other through body posture, vocalization, and even the most subtle of facial expressions. Watch their expressions carefully. Try to keep your current dog's personality in mind. Is he active and lively, or reserved? How has your current dog behaved in the past when greeting a new dog? Is he shy? Is he bold and exuberant, anxious to make new friends? Has your dog's access to other dogs been limited?

When dogs are introduced to each other, they will most likely be very curious about the other. Sniffing the other's hindquarters is common. The dogs may display a variety of signals. These may include ignoring one another, turning their heads away from one another, avoiding eye contact, even lying down and looking the other way to avoid conflict. If they do not seem interested in sniffing each other, don't push it. You should not attempt to rush a proper introduction. One dog may attempt to initiate play by performing a “play-bow” - dropping his front legs to the ground, leaving his hind end up in the air. If both dogs are comfortable with each other, this is a great sign. But, keep in mind that even this introduction segment should be kept short so that the play session does not escalate into an uncomfortable or possibly aggressive situation. If either dog displays any

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of the following signals or postures, stop the introduction immediately:

- **teeth-barring**
- **deep growling**
- **prolonged direct staring**
- **freezing body posture**

These are powerful signals to let you, and the other dog, know that they are not comfortable with the situation. Separate the dogs. Again, use a calm and cheerful voice. Your goal is to distract them from each other and give them an alternative positive experience. You may attempt to introduce the dogs again, but keep it slow, for shorter periods of time, and keep a little more distance between them.

Taking Your New Dog Home

The introduction went well and the dogs are showing no signs of aggression towards each other. They are more interested in you and the environment than in each other. It is now time to introduce the new pet to your household. No matter how great the dogs are getting along, never leave them unsupervised. It will take time before everyone is comfortable with the new arrangement. The new dog will be learning the house rules, and where he fits into the scheme of things. The resident dog will be adjusting to a newcomer in his territory.

Keep your resident dog on his old routine. Feeding times, exercise times and bedtime should be the same. This will give him a sense of security. Feed the dogs in separate locations. Watch for signs of growling and food guarding. Carefully observe their interactions.

When bringing a new puppy into a household, you may find that his persistent and sometimes overzealous attempts at playing with your older dog may be returned by loud growls and barks. A puppy still learning his social skills, manners and signals may find himself “scolded” by the older dog until he learns the rules of dog etiquette. This “scolding” is normal and you should not intervene unless there is a real danger of your dog biting or hurting the puppy.

You may notice the following behaviors as the dogs attempt to establish themselves in the new pack order:

- **food guarding**
- **favorite object/toy guarding**
- **toy “stealing”**
- **guarding favorite sleeping area/dog bed**

You may also notice that a dog may either growl, bark, or give a subtle glance of disapproval. Again, these are forms of communicating what is acceptable and what is not. Avoid intervening during these normal dominance tests. Sometimes dog owners feel compelled to step in during interactions like this, attempting to “even out” the playing field. Do not scold your dog for sending these signals and **do not take a toy or rawhide away from one dog and give it back to the other**. These are tests and means of establishing dominance, and they are very normal and important.

When to Get Help

If the dogs are not getting along, and you are concerned about the safety of either dog, contact a qualified behavior consultant immediately. With proper guidance, conflicts can often be resolved.

For more information about pet behavior and training, please **visit our website at michiganhumane.org**.