Meeting and greeting on leash is the worst and most difficult way for two dogs to meet. It is also the most common. Dogs and their people meet and greet on daily walks. Leashes also provide the safest and most illuminating way to assess two dogs before allowing off-leash access (for dog trainers or day care workers) or making placement decisions (for shelter or rescue workers). Observing a dog's response to the restraint and frustration that a leash creates is invaluable information to both trainers and adoption counselors. The leash also allows for a bail-out during dog-dog interactions so that the dogs can be kept as safe from harm as possible.

However, I want to make it clear that in a perfect world, no dogs would have to tolerate meeting or greeting other dogs while on leash. Just because I assess dogs on leash, it does not in any way mean I think dogs should be taught to interact with other dogs while leashed. If anything, dogs should be protected from having to interact with other dogs while leashed. It’s hard, stressful, and serves no good purpose or goal. If the interaction ends in play, the dog will only want to pull harder to get to other dogs; if the interaction ends in a squabble, the dog will likely become more and more anxious when it sees another dog while out and about on leash.

The purpose of this article is to help trainers, daycare staff, and shelter workers understand the challenges and benefits of on-leash assessments.

Procedures for Assessing Dog-Dog Interaction:

If you are assessing dogs at a shelter, both dogs will likely be unknown. When the assessment is being done by a professional trainer or dog-day-care worker, one dog will be the tester dog, and one will be the one being tested. Tester dogs often have a short half-life. It’s of the utmost importance that the tester dog be kept safe from harm and observed carefully for signs of stress or deteriorating capacity for the task. Early retirement is often a good package deal for the tester dog, before quitting or getting fired.

Using Fake Dogs

In addition to or instead of using a real tester dog, you can use a life-like, fake stuffed dog. This can be invaluable both to protect your tester dogs from stress and to keep tester dogs safe when you think the dog being tested might attack and harm the tester dog. I learned this from John Rogerson, whose personal dogs are Border Collies; he has a fake Border Collie that he brings out at the end of the evaluation [when the dogs get close enough to cause injury]. The fake dog should look as much as possible as a real dog, complete with a leash, a collar with jingling tags, and heeled in as life-like a way as possible. (Go to melissaanddoug.com for a variety of breeds of realistic stuffed dogs.)

Location of Assessment

Assessments can be performed indoors if the room is a minimum of 20 feet long. Outdoor testing is more realistic, but if the outside testing area is highly distracting (other dogs or lots of people coming or going) then indoors is a better option. Indoors, overall arousal levels can be lower, and the assessment can generate more focused and organized interaction.

Equipment Check

Be sure to do an equipment check before starting the assessment. Leashes should be six-feet-long. Collars and leashes should be safe from accidental breakage or slippage (collar too loose, etc.).

At any point in the testing, if the dog is showing enough risky behavior or many slightly-risky behaviors, the test can be aborted. If necessary, the fake, stuffed dog can come in and replace the real tester dog.

Sequence of procedure

These are the sequential elements of the assessment. I’ll explain later how to interpret responses at each of the four stages.

1. 30 seconds of restraint at a distance

Dogs are both restrained at a distance of at least 15 feet or more, distance not to exceed 50 feet.

2. Approach

Handlers should either move towards a center spot, or one dog remains stationary and the other dog moves slowly closer. The leashes are likely taut here and handlers, especially professional dog trainers, should not go into
reeled in from above the dog. Handlers should not reach under a dog’s chest or pick up a dog’s foot to untangle them.

**Least Risky Responses:**

*Non-aligned body orientation:* “Aligned” refers to the dog’s eyes, head, and spine. An aligned dog’s eyes, head, and spine are in one long row. “Non-aligned” is when any of the three is not in a row. The healthiest body positions include the cashew-like, curled spine or averted eyes or head.

*Two-way communication (call and answer behaviors):* The dogs are paying attention to each other and when one dog changes a behavior, the other dog responds back. Even rough or slightly risky responses are at least responses and indicate some communication and, therefore, a lower likelihood of a horrific attack.

*Tandem or mirrored behaviors during play and/or interruptions:* Just like human friends who begin to mimic each other’s gestures and inflection, I think dogs who are friendly with each other begin to pick up on each other’s gestures, activities, styles, and movements, and you’ll see dogs move in tandem or in mirror images with each other. This can happen during play or during interruptions in play.

*Slow interactions:* This is a rather murky description on my part, as how do you measure speed? But, what I mean is that time allows for more and better communication, and time allows for arousal levels to settle, and time allows for stress to ease, etc. Slow interactions have lots of breaks in action and changing movements/orientations.

*Self-interruption:* This is a very important behavior to see, as dogs who interrupt themselves are slowing down the interaction, usually not obsessed with the other dog. (Obsessed with play or obsessed with fighting are often equally frustrating and difficult behaviors for pet owners.) Dogs who interrupt themselves are attempting communication. The good news is that self-interruption can be taught to a dog who doesn’t offer the behavior naturally! Common and healthy behaviors during self-interruptions and breaks include:

- Look back at human.
- Mirrored or tandem movements.
- Shake off.
- Brief floor sniffing (once or twice in the midst of interaction, not prior to interaction).

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2. “Call” with delayed answer: When one dog moves or changes in some way, and the other dog delays in responding for one second or longer.

3. Frontal and aligned body orientation: When the eyes, head and spine are in one single row, and the dog is directly facing frontal to the other dog.

4. Faster interactions: This description is difficult to count or determine sometimes but, in general, dogs with high arousal move quicker. And, dogs who rush into the behaviors or move fast allow less time for the other dog to gauge the meaning of those behaviors and can overwhelm a dog with less-than-perfect skills.

Most Risky Responses:

The following responses are what I have observed to indicate the greatest risk, and the behaviors that should keep handlers in high alert. Except for the last two responses, I would almost always recommend using the fake, stuffed dog for any contact. If more than one of the following responses occur together, then I would absolutely only allow contact between the dogs if the tester dog were the fake, stuffed one.

1. Continuous escalation of arousal and intensity: Even if the handlers believe the dog “only wants to play,” a continuous escalation in arousal and intensity can indicate the dog is nearing aggression threshold, and it can take very little to bump the dog over threshold.

Slightly More Risky Responses:

The following responses are not necessarily signs of aggression or danger, but these are behaviors to observe and consider important because they often serve as “red-flags” for potential, future escalations and problems. The less a dog depends upon the perfect and best behaviors and responses from another dog, the higher the chances of a problem since, inevitably, the dogs that will be encountered in a slightly-risky dog’s lifetime are not likely to be as “friendly” as their owners swear they are.

1. Direct eye contact sustained more than two seconds: Almost always, this eye contact is void of blinking.

2. Full frontal, aligned body orientation with sustained direct eye contact: This is when the dog combines the frontal body orientation with alignment of eyes, head and spine, along with eye contact that is sustained more than two seconds.
3. **No self-interruption:** Even if interpreted as the dog’s desire to play, a dog who maintains his attention on the other dog, without looking away or at anyone or anything else in the environment, indicates a dog that is out of control in the very least and intent on doing harm at the very worst.

4. **Barking with teeth exposed:** This is when the dog’s incisors are briefly visible at the top of every bark. This can be difficult to train your eye to see, but much easier after the behavior is video-taped and played back in slow motion. When freeze-framed, the picture of the dog, with his teeth exposed, is unmistakably displaying aggressive intent.

5. **Body weight forward:** This is when the dog’s front and rear legs are in readiness to move forward, and the dog’s body weight is forward. While this alone isn’t necessarily dangerous, it is indicative of the readiness of the dog to take action and the position favors hard, physical contact.

6. **Size Disparity Between Dogs:** Everything else aside, simply having a very small, fragile or feeble dog about to interact with a larger, more muscular or physically powerful dog increases the risk to the smaller dog so significantly that the interaction leaves no room for error. Therefore, I consider simply a size disparity reason for remaining in high alert.

**Conclusion**

I find observing and assessing dog-dog interactions even more challenging and exciting and perplexing than observing and assessing dog-human interaction. This is because there are two dogs to keep your eyes on at the same time, and we can’t control the behavior of either dog. When observing and assessing dog-human behaviors, we