

How to Navigate On-Leash Greetings with Poorly Managed Dogs

We've all been there: "MY DOG IS FRIENDLY!" the owner screams as her dog, on a 26-foot flexileash, rushes to greet your leashed dog. Seems harmless, no? Not so.

[Casey Lomonaco](#) | Mar 27th 2012 | [40 Contributions](#)

Dog walker Jess Dolce recently began a campaign that took the doggy nerd and social media worlds by storm. Her blog, [Notes from a Dog Walker](#), addressed a problem dog trainers are all too familiar with: dog reactivity problems created by poorly managed, uber-social dogs. She calls these supersocial dogs MDIFs, which is actually more a reference to the owner's behavior than the dog's. "MY DOG IS FRIENDLY!" the owner screams as her dog, either on a 26-foot flexileash or having pulled free from her owner, rushes to greet another leashed dog. Read the [original PSA on MDIFs here](#) (opens as PDF).

Dog trainers know that leashed greetings often create a recipe for disaster, even in socially compatible dogs. The only time they tend to go well is when you have two dogs who like to meet by sniffing each other first, not dogs for whom "play" or any over-the-top social interactions are default behaviors.



[People and dogs on the street](#) by

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We're all familiar with the "fight or flight" dichotomy, and the leash removes the flight option, which dramatically increases the chances of a fight. An off-leash "friendly dog" rushing an on-leash "friendly dog" may cause the leashed dog to develop leash reactivity problems where none existed. This happens to a lot of dog people: They socialize their dogs well, and then BAM! One bad incident creates a lifetime of behavior modification. The MDIF and owner go home and relax, while the leashed dog now barks and lunges when other dogs pass by. Many MDIFs have dozens of "victims."

This happened to my Saint Bernard, Cuba, recently. Deep in the throes of adolescence, Cuba is passing through a second fear period. He was tethered at the classroom, relaxing with a bone, when an unfamiliar dog pulled his leash out of his owner's hand, ran up to Cuba like a freight train, and jumped on his back. Cuba definitely did not think this behavior was friendly. It would be like going to dinner with your family in a nice restaurant when a stranger enters and is SOEXCITEDTOSEEEYOU that he leaps at you and tackles you like a linebacker. Friendly? Maybe the person had good

intentions, but I would see such behavior as very scary and grossly inappropriate. Luckily, I was able to split up Cuba and his MDIF without injury -- although it sounded a lot worse than it was, with a lot of snarling and growling. But both dogs went away changed by the experience: Cuba may now have resource guarding issues, barrier frustration difficulties, and leash reactivity to Golden Retrievers, fluffy dogs, reddish-gold dogs, etc. Only time will tell. The approaching dog, on the other hand, learned that if he pulls hard and long enough on his leash, he will get whatever he wants, including the opportunity to rehearse inappropriate behaviors.

Leila is a rescued, very friendly hound mix belonging to Nicole, client turned best friend and occasional training assistant. Leila is, essentially, Lomonaco dog version 2.5 and is a member of my family. She also has luxating patella in her rear legs. While she is very friendly and likes to play, she does not like to play with exuberant, bouncy steam-roller MDIFs who jump on her hips.

MDIFs are the nemeses of DINOS -- Dogs in Need of Space. DINOS come in many forms. They may be service dogs, friendly dogs who are out to train and not play on a given day, females in heat, dogs with contagious diseases or medical issues, dogs with reactivity or aggression problems, dogs with disabilities, senior dogs, or dogs owned by people who are frightened by strange dogs.

I'd argue that the human elements need to be addressed here to include PINOS (People in Need of Space) and BILDs ("But I Love Dogs!"). There are many people who are afraid of dogs, who have allergies, or who simply do not like dogs. MDIFs are often allowed to rush at every person they meet, jumping and wiggling and smooching. While the dog and his owner may have good intentions, the person approached can be uncomfortable and apprehensive.



[Street dogs reacting to one another.](#) Via

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DINOS are often also victimized by BILDs. A DINOS owner may be trying desperately to manage her dog, who is afraid of men, while an approaching lumberjack is assuring her that he loves dogs and therefore dogs love him. Another may be trying to teach her dog not to jump on approaching people, which is the cue for the BILD to say, "It's fine -- I love dogs!" Unfortunately, the owner doesn't think it's fine, because her dog's training has just received a setback.

While it's great to have a friendly dog, it's really important that your dog's fun never comes at the expense of another dog or person's safety and comfort. That crosses the boundary from friendliness into bullying.

Best Practices If You Own a "My Dog Is Friendly!" Dog

- Check your hardware! Before leaving for a walk, inspect all leashes, collars, harnesses, and halters for frays or damage. Replace damaged equipment promptly.
- If you use a flexileash, keep it locked at about six feet, unless you have 360-degree visibility, such as in a large field or grassy area. If you see another person or dog/handler team approaching, shorten the leash to six feet and hold your dog's attention until the other team passes.
- Train your dog. While I know it's fun to have a friendly dog, it can also be frustrating. Find a trainer who can teach your dog that working with you is just as much fun as playing with other dogs.
- Don't expect your dog to like or play with every dog she meets. Figure out your dog's play style and find dogs who like to play similarly.
- Any time you want your dog to greet a strange dog or person, always ask first! This helps keep everyone safe. If a person or fellow dog owner says "No, thank you," don't take offense -- they may be concerned for your safety, in a rush, out for a training walk, or just having a bad day. Assume goodwill!

It's tempting to sling mud both ways. "That dog is aggressive -- he growled at my darling Poochie!" "That dog is a jerk -- I can't believe he ran up and jumped on my dog!" "That owner is irresponsible." But this gets in the way of the fact that we are all dog owners and dog lovers who will all benefit.

We should all assume that other people love their dogs as much as we love ours, and respect their right to enjoy the same parks and sidewalks. We should remember that each time we leave home with our dogs, we are representing the community of dog lovers as a whole. Every time someone fails to pick up dog poop, the chance that dogs will eventually be banned from the park increases. Each time a dog on a flexileash rushes on another dog and causes a fight or injury, the risk that flexis will be banned increases (which is a topic for another blog entry!).

Being a dog lover has to be about more than your own dogs. It is about loving and respecting *all* dogs, wishing to protect them from physical and emotional harm, and acting in a manner which promotes the status of dogs as valuable and safe within our communities and culture.

Will you sign the [DINOS manifesto](#)? If you own a DINOS dog, why do you think your dog is that way? How do you handle MDIF situations?

If you own an MDIF dog, what training techniques have helped? Has a greeting ever gone wrong for your dog? What are your biggest training challenges?