



TOUCHY FEELY

I have a confession to make: I'm not comfortable with strangers or casual acquaintances hugging me or putting their hands on me while they talk with me. I like my space and I'm not comfortable with strangers getting too close. With people that I know, things are different. But if we've just met, please allow me my space.

I have another secret to tell you: Rover can feel the same way.

Dogs don't necessarily enjoy being petted, especially by people they don't know. There are many dogs that love to be cuddled and hugged by their family members, yet tense, turn away or even snap at strangers or acquaintances who reach out to pet them. There is not necessarily anything wrong with these dogs—they just get uncomfortable.

I can ask you to please back off a little when I'm uncomfortable with how close you are. More likely, I'll use my body language and move back a step or two. Rover can't tell you he's uncomfortable, but his body language will usually tell the story: his head might turn away or his mouth might clamp or he might even show his teeth. He may be perfectly fine sitting next to me while I talk with someone, but if that unfamiliar hand reaches towards him, he may back up or turn away or even growl or snap. This doesn't mean that he's aggressive or a mean or bad dog; he just might not like being touched by strangers.

Dogs are all individuals. Some don't like being touched by people with whom they are not intimately familiar. Most dogs enjoy being petted by their family—but not all dogs. Many dogs don't like being hugged, no matter who is doing the hugging. Expecting a dog to accept a touch from anyone at any time is not realistic.

Dogs on leash are even more likely to react adversely. They can't get away from the situation, so if they're uncomfortable, their only option is a growl, snap or bite. Again, these are not necessarily bad dogs, but they are not comfortable being touched by strangers.

Dogs will usually indicate if they want to interact with you. They will initiate contact; they'll sniff you and often nudge you with their head. If you don't get that "invitation," DON'T pet the dog. They can't tell you in words whether or not they like being petted by strangers, so you must assume they don't like it unless they show you otherwise. It doesn't matter if the dog is the cutest dog in the world; cute has nothing to do with it.

Why do we assume that a dog wants to be petted? Most likely it's because we enjoy petting dogs. We think that dogs will like the same things we do, but we know that's not true. After all, when was the last time you sniffed another person, rolled in stinky stuff, flopped down in mud puddles, or chased and ate a lizard. Dogs are a different species, so it's natural they will enjoy different things.

I have yet another secret: all little dogs don't like being picked up. WHAT? Yes, it's true. Little dogs are wired the same as big dogs: they, too, have four feet and generally are happier when the four feet are on the ground. Again, they are individuals: some love being picked up and carried around, but others really do not.

We've worked with many small dogs that refused to come when called by their owners or actually bit them. In almost every case, the dogs were being picked up without their consent and didn't enjoy it. If you want to pick up your dog, get down on the floor, invite him into your lap and then pick him up. If he wiggles, tenses up or tries to get away, put him down.

Again, dogs don't necessarily enjoy the same things we do. They are a different species. Put yourself in their place. Would you like someone ten times bigger than you reaching down and picking you up without asking if it's okay? I wouldn't. I'd run in another direction or find some place to hide. Hmmm, I've seen lots of dogs do that.

All of this is about respect. Dogs are individuals, some love getting attention from anyone and some are more reserved. Some love being picked up and some don't. If you watch them they'll let you know how they feel. Respect their feelings. When you do, your dog will be happier. Say it with me. . . *Happy Dogs = Happy Families!*

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