

The Three Second Rule of Canine Greetings

Three seconds is the maximum amount of time an initial greeting between two dogs on leash should last. “One potato, two potato, three and walk away.” When you’re walking away after number three, give each dog a second or two to forget about each other. Once both dogs have been distracted, you can bring them back for another meeting (assuming the first one went well) for a longer duration.



- Pay attention to both dogs! If the initial greeting escalates before “three”, walk away sooner.
- Remember that eye to eye greetings (direct eye to eye stare downs) are a recipe for disaster. If there is a stare down going on, don’t allow the dogs to meet. Appropriate dog to dog greeting should not be nose to nose, but rather glancing and looking away and more of a side approach.
- Watch the tails! If the tails are stiff, tucked tightly or only the tip is wagging very fast (which means the dog is aroused) like a rattle snake, then you need to end the greeting before the three seconds are up. A good tail wag for greetings is soft and loose, almost like the whole back end of the dog is wagging.
- Watch the heads! If one dog is positioning his head over the top of the other dog’s head or shoulders, walk away before the three seconds is up.
- Watch the mouth! If the dogs’ jaws are tight and they are not breathing, walk away before the three seconds is up.
- Look for butt sniffing! It is common and good for dogs to sniff each other’s butts. I like to call it “reading the pee mail”. A good canine greeting involves the dogs walking in a circle sniffing for “pee mail”, which loose and curvy bodies. Even with a good initial greeting, the three second rule still applies!
- Loose leash! During the greeting, keep the leash loose – tight leashes raise arousal in a dog. When the three seconds is up, don’t jerk on the leash and pull your dog away, rather call your dog away and keep that leash loose!
- The three second rule is important for the first greeting, and a very good practice for ALL dog greetings. Give them their three seconds, walk away and if all goes well, take it from there!

Facilitating a proper canine greeting will lay a foundation for your dog to have healthy relationships with other dogs. The three second rule gives your dog the opportunity to know that you’ve got things under control, that s/he is safe and that builds trust.