

Do's and Don'ts Around Working Dogs

How to be courteous and safe when encountering working dogs on the job.

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When people see Buster, everyone wants to pet him, says Corporal Tim Nussmeier of the Evansville Police Department (EPD). Buster is a highly-trained explosives detection dog. He's also about the friendliest black Labrador Retriever ever. And that sometimes makes work especially challenging for Buster — who loves attention but who's got a serious job to do.

"When he's getting ready to work, his handler doesn't want [the dog] to be approached and be distracted," explains Nussmeier, who is also Buster's trainer, a United States Police Canine Association certified trainer, and a 10-year K9 unit veteran. "The handler wants the dog to focus on the task at hand." Nussmeier points out people need to stay away so as not to contaminate the search area, too.

When the dog is finished working or training, however, if you want to meet him, "Ask the handler first before you approach the dog," recommends Nussmeier, who adds that he can't speak for all K9s, but those in the EPD's unit are very approachable.

"When I gave demos in schools with my dog, I used to cut him loose to mingle with the kids while I talked." He recounts a story of another EPD K9, Dereck, (a German Shepherd Dog) who used to go up and down the slides on the playground with school children. "One time he was so covered in kids, the only thing you could see was his tail in the air," laughs Nussmeier. "It didn't bother him at all."

"There is one time, however, that a working dog should never be approached," heeds Nussmeier: "If a working dog is alone in the car, never reach in to pet the dog. That's their space," he cautions. "He could be the best-tempered dog, but he's protecting his area."