

DOGGONE WALK

What to do if an unwelcome dog approaches you when you're walking yours
by **Laura McKinney**, A Rotta Love Plus



Many dogs (including service dogs, some old dogs, dogs who are recovering from an illness, dogs that don't like other dogs, and dogs that like other dogs too much) need extra space while out for a walk. If you have this type of dog, you know there are few things as frustrating as being accosted by an off-leash dog while enjoying your stroll. Here are a few strategies to use if you encounter an unwelcome dog during your walk.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

- Scope out the route on your own before you take your dog with you. Most off-leash dogs tend to be repeat offenders, so knowing the blocks and trails to avoid can be a big help. Off-leash dogs are less likely to hang out around busy roads, or during the early morning or late night.
- Bring your cell phone and have the number for the police or animal control programmed into it. Many off-leash dogs have owners lurking about somewhere, but some don't, and calling someone to take care of a stray might help another dog down the road. Not to mention, emergency numbers are important if there's ever, well, an emergency. For that matter, know the location of your closest emergency vet.
- Have control of your dog. Train important things like auto watches (getting them to look at you automatically when they see another dog) and emergency retreats (a strategy to get out of dodge before your dog has a chance to react to the other dog). If you're not 100% certain of your dog's training, make sure you have physical control over her. Use a training tool (e.g., a body harness) that will allow you to hold your dog back if necessary.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH, THEN TAKE ACTION

- Retreat, RETREAT! It's okay to turn around and go the other way; it can work really well for avoiding trouble. Teach your dog a "retreat" cue and make it a fun game for him. Don't run, though – most dogs instinctively notice and chase things that run.
- If approached by an off-leash dog, try to stay calm. Your dog will pick up on your tension – if people start screaming, it can push a tense situation into a confrontational one, which is what you're ultimately trying to avoid.
- Throw treats at the other dog. Preferably smelly, raunchy treats that will stop the other dog in his tracks and make him want to eat every little bit you dropped. Make your escape while the other dog is distracted. Repeat as necessary.
- If you think your dog will be okay with meeting the other dog, stay calm, keep a loose leash, and let them say "hi." Err on the side of caution here, but remember that most dogs actually get along fine with most other dogs.
- If all else fails, use a spray deterrent. There are several forms of citronella spray on the market, which will stop most dogs but aren't horribly aversive if you accidentally spray your dog. (Or yourself. Or the other "owner.") Aim for the face. Shout for help. Throw your dog over the nearest fence that doesn't have another dog in it. Sometimes an altercation is inevitable, so be sure you know how to break up a dog fight.

LET IT GO

- Go home, give your dog a cookie, and make yourself a stiff drink. Remember, stress hormones stay with you for forty-eight to seventy-two hours. If you had a bad incident with an off-leash dog, chances are either your brain is shot or your dog's is. Go home and spoil yourselves.
- Don't blame yourself or get hung up on what you could have done better. As much as we hope differently and educate other owners, off-leash dogs are sort of inevitable. They're out there, and if you walk your dog, you're going to run into them. Think critically about the situation: Was there anything you could have done better? If the answer is no, think of what went well. If you're all still breathing, that's reason enough to celebrate.
- Give people the benefit of the doubt. Most owners of off-leash dogs are not intentionally irresponsible. They love their dogs and feel that letting them off leash is good for them. Maybe they don't understand the problems associated with letting their dog off leash. If you have the opportunity to talk to them calmly, do so. Why hate when you can educate?