



DOGS OFF LEASH

You're walking along minding your own business when a dog comes running and barking towards you with no owner in sight. It can be frightening, and our instincts tell us to RUN or prepare to FIGHT. This is the "fight or flight" survival instinct kicking into high gear. This survival instinct is common to both people and dogs. Adrenaline starts releasing into our blood stream and our brains stop thinking. We're operating on pure instinct. If we give in and run, the dog WILL chase and, most likely, catch us. If we stand and fight, bad things can and most likely will happen.

In the last couple of weeks Rover and I have been approached three times by dogs running loose. In each case, everyone went their own way without incident.

The first time, we were walking around the neighborhood and a fairly big German shepherd came running out from between two houses. He was barking loudly and startled me.

My instinct was to shorten the leash to get Rover right next to me and to tell him to sit, but I fought that instinct. I made sure the leash was loose and that Rover had room to move.

Rover and the other dog speak the same language, so I decided to let Rover handle the introductions. I just stood quietly watching but not making direct eye contact. I just stayed uninterested and uninteresting.

They met and sniffed, and then the dog came over to sniff me. I didn't react at all. After looking at both of us, he just trotted away. The entire encounter took about 30 to 45 seconds.

Dogs don't want to fight. As long as they see the signals each displays and they respond accordingly, most of the time, they just do a quick meet-and-greet.

The next dogs we met were at Lake Park. Rover and I were walking around the lake and a beagle and pit bull came out of the bushes. We repeated our procedure. I gave Rover the entire length of leash and let him "talk" to the two of them first. Again, I didn't move; I remained as uninteresting as possible. The beagle approached immediately, but the pit remained back and showed some signs of being a little nervous. He looked at us, then looked around to see if others were coming—or to make sure he had a clear escape route.

Rover and the beagle sniffed and greeted, and then the beagle came and sniffed me. Again, I didn't react but remained aloof. The beagle decided we weren't very interesting, and went off to follow a scent that promised to be a more interesting encounter. As the beagle started off, the pit bull decided he wanted to know what the beagle knew. He shyly approached, gave me a "drive by" sniff, and then did the meet-and-greet with Rover. Satisfied, he went on to follow the beagle.

The third meeting was back in our neighborhood. A young Rottweiler and an older German shepherd spotted us a couple blocks from home. The Rottie immediately charged and wanted to play with Rover. The shepherd stood back and barked at us a few times. I didn't let Rover play, but we stood our ground. I had given Rover the full length of leash, and I stood still but relaxed—watching but not making eye contact. The shepherd made a couple of runs at us, veering off as it got close. He did this a few times while the Rottie bounced at Rover still trying to elicit play. As we started to walk again, the shepherd would run and turn to see if we were following. The running, stopping, looking at us, and then running again lasted a couple of blocks before the two of them turned and went in a different direction.

I let Rover "speak" for us because Rover does not bark, get protective or defensive when he sees other dogs, even if they are barking. I can trust him to remain calm and take his cues from me. If I didn't trust Rover, I might react differently.

If Rover weren't well behaved, my reaction would be different. If he got upset when seeing other dogs, I would correct him as soon as he noticed the other dogs, and then we would just keep walking. If you make a dog sit and



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stare at something that makes him upset, his anxiety will likely increase because his focus is on the source of his anxiety instead of being on you.

Our natural instinct to tighten the leash and make Rover sit could escalate the situation. If Rover were sitting, his tail wouldn't be visible to the other dog so his body language might not be as clear as when standing. Tightening the leash might also make Rover think something is wrong and might trigger his protective instincts.

By remaining calm and letting Rover "talk" to the dogs, the tension stayed low, everyone met and then went on their way. Typically, dogs don't want to fight. They usually fight only if they don't see any way to avoid it.

You have to know your dog in order to figure out what course of action will be the safest for both him and you. If your dog does get worked up when he sees another dog, you might want to think about working on his behavior.

We've helped numerous dogs that got worked up when they saw other dogs. It sometimes may take a while, but with patience and guidance, this behavior can be changed. It's not too late to change that stressful walk into a pleasant one even if you meet dogs off leash. We all know the results . . .

Happy Dogs = Happy Families

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