



HOW TO HANDLE LOOSE DOGS AND DOG FIGHTS

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Training Dogs. Enhancing Lives.

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I took a walk one morning with a few of my friends. We were in our neighborhood and I brought my dog, Denver, along because he needed exercise too. About 15 minutes

into our walk, one of my friends nervously proclaimed, “There’s a dog off-leash over there.” I looked up to see a pitbull mix, off-leash, staring at us.



As soon as we noticed him, he began to race towards us. Immediately, my friends' nervous anxiety turned to panic. They screamed as I told them not to worry. They grabbed my arm as I told them to relax. They proclaimed they were going to be attacked as I told them the dog was friendly. Within a matter of seconds, the unknown dog had reached us and began a humorous (to me) playful dance with my dog, trying to solicit Denver to play. When Denver politely declined the invitation to play, the dog ran off again. I smiled and then noticed the terror in my friends' faces.

As my friends began to breathe again, they hailed me a hero in the face of adversity while being "attacked by a dog." And it dawned on me that we had seen the situation from two entirely different perspectives. Their perspective was that we were being attacked by a dangerous dog. My perspective was that a friendly dog off-leash wanted to play with my dog. And in that instance, there was nothing either of us could do to change the other's perspective.

My perspective comes from over 20 years of dealing with dogs, with a particular focus on interpreting off-leash behaviors and canine body language. There was nothing in the dog's body language that indicated he was aggressive. In fact, his exaggerated motions, loose, wiggly body language, and lateral movement while he approached us were clear indicators of play. And I knew my dog would not react, so there was nothing to worry about. I just stood calmly and waited for the dog-to-dog greeting to happen.

But what would I have done if the dog were not friendly? What would I have done if I knew Denver wouldn't have tolerated the strange dog? And what should you do if a dog is chasing you and you aren't sure if it's friendly?

These are questions that come up all the time from people who live in neighborhoods where dogs run off-leash. And let's face it, not every dog wants to greet a strange dog. Not every person enjoys the company of an unknown dog. And not every off-leash dog is friendly. So what do you do if you see a dog off-leash?



Here are my usual suggestions:

- **First – don't run.** This is counterintuitive, but running will often cause a dog to chase and will likely create more arousal and aggression in the dog if he is already in an aroused state. Instead, stand still at first and then walk away slowly.
- **Yell "SIT" or "GO HOME"** - This will often make the average dog nervous enough to leave you alone. But be believable and yell with confidence.

For more persistent dogs, I would try the following:

- **Take massive amounts of smelly, high value treats on a walk with you** (chicken, liver, cheese, steak etc). If you see a loose dog throw a big handful of treats at the dog in the hope that he will stop to eat the treats while you move away.



- **Take an umbrella with you on walks** – the automatic kind that allows you to push a button to open it. Often, having an umbrella open suddenly into the face of an oncoming dog will scare the dog enough to disorient him and cause him to retreat. (NOTE...if you are going to use this method, make sure your dog is used to being on the other side of the umbrella when it opens, or you are likely to freak your own dog out!)
- **Purchase Spray Shield animal deterrent** to take with you on your walks. This is a form of citronella spray you can spray at a dog (think “mace for dogs”). The downside to this product is the dog has to be really close which is why I prefer using treats, but if you wind up trying to break up a dog fight, this might help.

If a dog is running full steam at you, it’s hard to say if any of these methods will work, but they are worth a try. Despite the media

hype, the vast majority of dogs off-leash are not trying to attack humans. For most dogs, yelling at them or throwing treats at them will work fine.

But what happens if none of these tactics work and you end up with a dog that approaches you and/or your dog. What do you do if two dogs get into a fight?

If you are walking your dog and your dog is actually attacked by another dog, (either because the actions mentioned above didn’t work, or the dog came so quickly that you had no time to react), I would choose one of two initial options based on the size of your dog.

- **If you have a small dog, pick up your dog.** This is risky for you because the oncoming dog may jump up at you. However you have a better chance of protecting your small pet if you pick him up, especially if the other dog is large.



- **If your dog is large, drop the leash.** Although it's not ideal to have a loose dog, especially if you are near traffic or

other hazards, it's much more dangerous to have dogs fighting and getting tangled in a leash.

Minimizing a fight

Before discussing the steps to safely break up a fight, let's discuss how to minimize and prevent a fight in the first place. The two main ways that you minimize fights when your dog is on a walk is to teach your dog to be polite and non reactive on leash, and be sure to socialize your dog around other dogs. Both of these actions will help to create a dog that is less likely to instigate trouble with another dog in the neighborhood. While loose dogs may still follow you, these actions will help to ensure that your dog isn't creating more problems by barking or lunging at dogs. If you have a dog that is reactive to other dogs when you are out for a walk, consider getting some assistance from a qualified dog trainer who can help teach your dog to be calm in the presence of other dogs.



Dog fights and bites

It's important to clarify the language surrounding dog incidents. Not everything is an emergency. By my definition, a fight is really the most severe level of an aggressive display between dogs. But dogs communicate with each other using a wide range of signals. Canine body language also consists of less intense aggressive displays between dogs. The terms I use are found in my book, **Off-Leash Dog Play**, and can help clarify the type and severity of any incident between two dogs.

- **Snark:** A snark is one dog vocalizing. There is no contact between the dogs and usually no movement of the dogs towards one another. This might happen if you have a dog laying in a bed and another dog runs by and bumps into the bed. The dog in the bed may stand up and bark or growl at the other dog. The other dog doesn't respond. It's the equivalent of a person yelling, "Hey, stop doing that" as a reprimand to another person.
- **Tiff:** In a tiff both dogs vocalize, but there is little movement of the dogs towards one another. It's two dogs basically yelling at each other. So, using the example from above, with a tiff, both dogs would bark at one another. Tiffs

are short in duration and end as soon as the vocalization occurs.

- **Scuffle:** In a scuffle, the dogs make physical movement toward one another in addition to the vocalizations. They might actually make contact for a brief second but do not leave any marks or injuries. There's no real intensity to the argument. A scuffle usually lasts just one or two seconds. The difference between the tiff or snark and a scuffle is that there is more than just vocalizations happening. The dogs do move toward one another in a display of confidence.
- **Fight:** A fight is actually two dogs hashing it out over some type of resource or status. In a fight, dogs actually make contact, vocalize with growls or snarls, and use their teeth. A fight will often last ten seconds or more. A fight does not always result in injury. Later in this article you will see that dogs have an amazing ability to control their teeth and jaws. So it is possible to have a fight without any resulting injuries.

What do to in a fight

If a fight happens, then obviously your number one goal is to end the fight as quickly as possible. The most common response to a fight for most people is to grab the collars of the dogs and pull them apart. I would recommend this only as a last resort. Touching the

dogs can result in redirected aggression to you even from a dog you know well. It's not uncommon to get bitten while separating two dogs fighting because the dogs are so highly aroused that they may bite anything in their path..including a person.



So what can you use instead of your hands to separate the dogs? I would try the following:

- **Make a loud noise.** Yell at the dogs, stomp your feet or bang something together. If you walk in an area where there is a high likelihood of a dog fight, you might want to carry an air horn or loud whistle. If you are dealing with multiple dogs in a home or office, you might keep stainless steels bowls around which you can hit together. The goal with the loud noise is to startle and/or scare the dogs enough that they stop fighting.
- **Push something in between the dogs.** If you have a large backpack or purse, you can push it in between the dogs to try to separate them. If you are inside, try pushing something towards the dogs such as light furniture, a chair, or play equipment. Again, the goal here is to startle and/or scare the dogs enough that they stop fighting.
- **Throw something over the dogs.** Another option is to throw something on top of the dogs. Use bedding, a towel, a blanket or a jacket to cover the dogs' heads. If you can cover the dog's eyes and ears, you can sometimes disorient

them and they will hopefully stop fighting.

- Use **Spray Shield**. Spray Shield is a citronella based spray. It's an animal deterrent you would spray in the face of the dogs. Spray Shield may irritate the dog's eyes (much as mace would to a human), but it is a good option to use if the fight continues longer than a few seconds.

When a fight happens, you have to make decisions quickly. You only have a couple of seconds to decide the best course of action. If one option doesn't work, quickly move to another one.

Does water work to separate a fight?
Water does sometimes help stop a fight, but I have found you usually have to have a large amount of water. If you are near a large bucket of water you could probably pick that up and throw it on the dogs. That might be effective. If you only have small stainless steel bowl of water, that's probably not going to be effective. Spraying the dogs with water from a spray bottle probably is not going to be effective. However, if you're outside and have access to a water hose that might work. Normally, I don't recommend water only because it's usually not easily accessible in large enough volumes to be effective.



In my experience the average dog fight usually ends quickly and can be stopped by startling the dogs. However, if none of the mentioned activities works, you may decide to grab the dogs physically. Just remember option is risky and should really be your last resort.

If you are going to physically intervene in a dog fight, you can minimize your risk of a bite by grabbing the dog by the hind legs rather than the neck. Lift the dog up by the hind legs with the front paws still on the ground. Picking up the rear of the will cause the dog to be off balance and will hopefully

startle the dog enough that he stops fighting. If possible, you can move the dog in an arc, causing him to balance himself on his front legs while you move him away from the other dog. Obviously this will only work if the other dog ceases the fight or if some-

one else grabs the second dog. The other obvious problem with this method is that the dog may want to turn and snap or bite you. Be mindful that when you let go, you need to remain calm and move away from the dog.

Separate the dogs

Once you have successfully stopped the fighting, you want to keep the dogs separated. How you do this is really going to depend on what dogs are involved and whether or not there are other people available to help. The ideal situation is to leash both of the dogs and move them away from one another. If there is a crate or other room, separate

the dogs in different areas. If you are alone, you may need to put the leash on one of the dogs and tether one dog and then try to get the other dog away. If you are dealing with a stray dog you may need to resort to some of the first three tactics (throwing food, using an umbrella etc.) to keep the stray dog away from you.



Look for injuries

Next you need to assess the dogs for injuries. Check the dogs looking for any kind of puncture or other injury. Is the dog limping? Do you see any apparent injury? Punctures don't always bleed right away so it is good to check the dogs periodically throughout the day. For longhaired dogs, a great option for looking for punctures is to use a hair dryer to blow the dogs hair away from the skin. This will make a puncture more visible. If the dog was picked up or shaken, get a veterinarian check up to ensure there are no injuries. It's possible for a dog to receive internal injuries, especially if they have been shaken.



Assess the injury level

With any dog fight injury, it is not enough to just say the dogs were in a fight and bit one another. The severity of the injury level is important. As mentioned previously, dogs have an amazing ability to control the way they use their mouths to inflict injury. Understanding of a dog's bite level helps me to make a determination about the bite inhibition of a particular dog. In turn, this helps me gauge how easy or challenging it might be to modify a dog's behavior. If it was a severe bite level, then even if it's the first bite, behavior modification would be more difficult and the risk of injury more likely in the future. For assessing bites, I use a scale developed by Dr. Ian Dunbar. His method assesses bite levels on a scale of 1-6 with 6 being the most severe. Generally speaking, I follow this guidance for dog bites to both humans and dogs.

- **Level 1** is a bite that makes no contact. Sometimes people refer to this as a "snap" or "nip".
- **Level 2** is a bite that makes contact but there is no puncture. In a level 2 bite, you might have some scraping but nothing serious.
- **Level 3** is a single puncture or a single bite with one to four punctures but the punctures are not very deep. Obviously the depth is going to be based on the size of the dog's teeth. A small dog is going to have a more shallow puncture simply because the teeth are smaller than a larger dog.
- **Level 4** is a single bite with one to four punctures but which also shows some bruising or lacerations if the dog bit down hard or if the dog shook its head

while biting. The punctures in a level 4 bite are also deeper.

- **Level 5** is characterized by multiple bites. The dog bit, let go, and then bit again.
- **Level 6** is death and/or mutilation.

In determining the severity of a fight, and

the success of working with the dog to prevent a similar bite from happening in the future, I want to know the severity of the injury. As the bite level increases, the difficulty in modifying the dog's behavior also increases. Not that any fight is a good one, but I would much prefer a fight that resulted in only level 1 or 2 bites rather than level 3 or above. This information will be



important to any trainer who works with aggression cases.

What do bite levels mean for a future bite? It's not totally clear. I can't say for sure that once a dog has bitten he will always bite. I also don't believe that a dog who tastes blood is likely to look for blood later. However, I generally assume that if the dog gets into another fight, the bite level will be

at least as high as in the past. Additionally, if it's a young dog (under 2 years of age) there is a good chance the bite level may increase as the dog grows older.

For any dog with aggression issues or who has been involved in a dog fight, contact a trainer who specializes in behavior modification or a qualified behaviorist to evaluate the dog and provide the best recommenda-

tions for helping the dog become a better canine citizen.

Robin Bennett is a Certified Professional Dog Trainer, author, consultant and expert on dogs. She founded one of the largest dog training companies in Virginia. She has been “reading dogs,” teaching families how to train dogs, and working in the pet care industry helping others keep dogs safe for over 20 years. Her first book, *All About Dog Daycare* is the number one reference on opening a dog daycare. Co-author of **Off-Leash Dog Play... A Complete Guide to Safety and Fun**, and an extensive staff training program called, **Knowing Dogs**, she is now making canine body language easy for everyone to understand. You can learn more about Robin and keep up with her on her blog at www.RobinKBennett.com

