

Hello Off Leash Dogs. Meet My Friend Direct Stop.

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Ask anyone who walks DINOS™ (Dogs in Need of Space): “What’s your worst fear?” and they’ll all tell you the same thing: Off Leash Dogs (OLDs). When you’re out walking your DINOS and you spot a loose dog, with no owner in sight, it’s hard not to freak out. So, I wanted to share some tips for dealing with OLDs. But just so we’re clear, nothing works 100% of the time.

The thing about off leash dog encounters is that they’re a little different every time and there are always a lot of variables in play. So what works once, doesn’t always work the next time. What’s safe to try with one dog, may not be safe with another. I know, because these tips don’t always work for me.

I’d be perfectly happy if someone invented a Pop-up Teflon Dog Walking Tent, so that I could lurch down the block with my DINOS, safely ensconced in our own personal fortress. But hey, sometimes these tips do work, so they’re worth storing in the old noggin.

Here they are, starting from the beginning:

Invest in a wardrobe that has generous pockets or a little dog walking bag.

On every dog walk, you should take the following, in addition to poop bags:



High Value Treats

Cell Phone with Camera and Animal Control on Speed Dial

Direct Stop aka Spray Shield (Optional)

+ One Bodyguard (it does help to have a second set of hands, just saying)

Be Quiet.

There are a lot of loose dogs hanging out in their yards. The very first thing you can do to avoid a confrontation is to slip by unnoticed. I do this two ways:

- . Cross to the other side of the street, so I’m not directly in front of their property
- . Tell my dogs to put a lid on it aka silence those tags:



Tip for dealing with Leashed Dogs or Dogs Inside Houses: Being quiet helps, even if the dogs you’re passing are inside or on leash. I used to walk a reactive Olde English Bulldog that wore so many tags, collars, harnesses, gold chains, gongs, and sleigh bells that we alerted every dog in the whole of South Philly that we were coming. Not surprisingly, we had to walk a gauntlet of barking dogs and he struggled mightily to keep his cool. It was unnecessary work – we were bringing the dogs to us, when we really wanted them to go away.

Engage Your Dog

Sometimes our DINOS are the ones attracting the attention with all that “debating” they like to do. So if you spot a dog before (or after) your DINOS does, be sure to engage your dog. Keep them focused on you, instead of staring or lunging at the other dog. Ask them to “look” at you. Talk to them in a happy, loose voice. Sing them a silly song with their name in it. Put a treat or toy in front of their nose. Do whatever you need to do to keep their attention on you, as you steer them past the dog hanging out in your neighbor’s yard, or while you do a u-turn (see below). You can flash a “stop” hand signal at the other dog too, just to reinforce the message that you and your dog aren’t interested – thank you very much.

Tip for Fenced in Dogs: If you’re passing dogs that are contained and barking or running the length of the fence, try this: Cross the street to make space and say “Hi Guys!” in a loud and cheery, high-pitched voice. Sometimes that’s all it takes to shut them up and it tells your dog that things are ok.

Lick Your Lips

You need to try to stay calm, if you want your dog to stay calm too, so do a body scan. Are you pulling the leash tight? Relax a little. Are you holding your breath? Lick your lips. You can't hold your breath and lick your lips at the same time. Talk in a happy tone. Let your dog know you're cool.

WHEN A DOG IS FOLLOWING YOU:

In any situation you have to do two things – deal with your dog and the oncoming one. This is really hard because these encounters typically happen in a matter of seconds, so even the best laid plans go out the window.

I won't lie: I full on face-planted a few months ago when a lovely gal opened her front door, which opened right onto the street, and let her dog run out just as I was passing with a reactive dog. As the door opened, I was already moving to the other side of the street, to make some distance, and called "Get your dog NOW!", but the dog was sprinting and caught up in a second. I tripped on my dog as I was trying to wrangle her and I fell. It happens. So I held on to the leash, as tight as I could while lying on my stomach and my dog lost her marbles at the end of the leash. The other dog, stood just an inch out of my dog's reach, until the gal finally came to get her dog. I was glad I didn't let go. Just wanted to share that even though my brain was telling me to do this stuff, I couldn't make it happen that time, so I just wiped out and held tight!

For your dog: Emergency U-Turn

Teach your dog to move quickly and calmly in the opposite direction, so that when you encounter a loose dog or a scary person, you can make a fast getaway. Teach them to do this on cue using a phrase and tone you're most likely to use if you encounter this scenario.

Like "Uh-Oh! Let's Go!" or "Holy Shit!" Whatever you think you'd actually say.

Here's one way (see link) to teach them this trick and check out Feisty Fido by Patricia McConnell for more, including Emergency Sit. (<http://www.aspcbehavior.org/articles/156/Teaching-Your-Dog-to-Do-a-U-Turn.aspx>)

IF YOU CAN'T GET AWAY:

For your dog: Body Block

This means getting in between your dog and the oncoming OLDs. Ideally, you've taught your dog a great sit-stay, so that you can step directly in front of them to deal with the loose dog.

For the loose dog: Use the VOG.

That's the Voice of God aka what James Earl Jones sounds like. Step in front of your dog and, using the VOG, say:

NO or STOP and flash the universal hand signal for stop: **a flat outstretched palm.**

The goal here is to startle the crap out of the other dog, so you want to really BOOM! If you've got their attention, try telling them to SIT, STAY, or GO HOME. Be fierce, stand tall, say it like you mean it.

IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE VOG OR IF THEY'RE STILL FOLLOWING YOU:

For the loose dog: Hurl Treats

Take a handful of those high value treats you've got in your pocket and throw them right in the other dog's face. The goal here is to startle them, and then have them look around for the food, giving you enough time to get away. I've had a 50-50 success rate with this, so it's worth a try, but I'll be the first to admit, it doesn't stop all dogs. Patricia McConnell did a test run you can watch here: <http://www.theotherendoftheleash.com/it-works-how-to-stop-an-approaching-dog-in-an-emergency>

Or Toss Pea Gravel at their feet. If you've got room in your cargo pants for a hand full of pea gravel, it can be worth carrying some to startle oncoming dogs by throwing this at their feet.

WHEN YOU ARE TRAPPED:

Tools

If your voice and treats don't work and you can't get away (and really, you only have a few seconds to make these calls, so you can just skip to this step, if you need to), this is when it's handy to have another tool on you. If you frequently walk in a neighborhood plagued with off leash dogs that you anticipate fending off, it's worth carrying one of the following:



Direct Stop otherwise known as Spray Shield

Umbrella (pop-up)

Airhorn

Shake can

Walking Stick

The idea would be to body block your dog, by standing in front of them, and then use any of the tools you have to stop the oncoming dog. Spray 'em, pop the umbrella open in their face, throw the penny can at them, blast the air horn, block them with the stick.

I vote for Direct Stop, a citronella spray. It won't harm the dog, if you have to spray them, so you're not risking their health. Plus, if their owner is nearby, just the sight of the spray will likely get them motivated to grab their dog, since they don't know it's harmless. If you use it, spray the dog right in the muzzle.

I highly recommend practicing with these tools. I've heard from dog walkers who have had Direct Stop on them, but in the chaos of the interaction, their brains totally bailed and they couldn't remember how to use the spray. To build confidence and a higher chance of success, practice unholstering and spraying. By repeating the movements when you're at ease, you'll build a muscle memory for that action, so that when panic takes over your brain your body will still remember what to do.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS:

Here's what some people I know have done, to get their dogs away from OLDs:

Thrown them over a fence

Thrown them over their shoulders while kneeling/kicking the loose dog

Thrown them into the bed of random a pick-up truck

I'm just saying, it's been done.

If the two dogs actually do connect, expect a lot of noise. Dogs sounds awful when they're in a tussle, but it's usually far worse sounding than it actually is. Try to stay calm (so hard), but if you're alone, I do suggest calling for help. I've yelled loud enough to get neighbors to come out of houses and give me a hand. Having a second set of hands is worth screaming for.

If you have a helper, **break up the fight** by: making a loud noise, spraying the dog with your Direct Stop, or finding something to use as a physical barrier to smash/slide in between the dogs so that you can safely separate the dogs. Look for something big, like a trash can lid, a chair, a recycling bucket, anything large and nearby that you can wedge between the dogs. Grabbing collars is an invitation to get bit (your own dog is likely to swing their head around and redirect on you), but sometimes people do it anyway. If you do grab collars, you can try twisting them to cut off air supply briefly. Try holding the back legs instead. When you're able to separate the dogs, both parties need to move away from each other, preferably in a wide circle – not straight back – and do not let go of the dogs. More on that here: <http://www.aspcbehavior.org/articles/198/Breaking-Up-a-Dogfight.aspx>

If you are all alone, I'm not going to lie. It's really hard to break up a dog fight by yourself. I've never had to do this alone, but what I know for sure is that when you break up a dog fight, you need to make sure that after the dogs are separated, they don't go right back at each other. One way to do this, if you are by yourself, is to tie one of the dogs to a fence or post or whatever is there, separate the dogs, and then do not let go of the one you're holding. Move the dog as far away as you can. If there is any way to tie them up or enclose them (unlocked car anyone?), do it. Call for help, call 911.

I know that sounds super scary, but in all the years I've been dog walking and dealing with OLDs, I can say that things rarely get this far (sometimes they do), but for the most part, dogs chase you away from their property or chase after you to play or try to start a little bit of trouble that you can stop with one of those tools.

No matter what happens, it's best to think about these things before they occur. Have a plan in place. Know the hot spots in your neighborhood with OLDs and avoid them, even if you have to take a less convenient route. Walk at off hours. Bring a friend, so you always have a second set of hands. Drive your dogs to a safe spot to walk them. If your dog is aggressive, use a muzzle, so you don't have to worry about them hurting a friendly off leash dog that gets in their face.

RECAP:

- . Give all dogs space by moving away from their property
- . Engage your dog – keep them focused on you and quiet enough not to attract unwanted attention
- . If you see a loose dog, try doing an Emergency U-turn and scoot out of there
- . If you're stuck, Body Block your dog, step forward and use the VOG
- . If the dog keeps coming and you feel like there's no escape, spray them with Direct Stop, blow your air horn, use your tools.
- . If contact is made, spray the dog or use whatever large object you have access to (from a stick to trash can lid) to slide in between dogs.
- . Separate dogs and do not let go. Call for help.
- . Go home and have a beer.

If just reading this exhausts you, I want you to know that it's ok to exercise your dogs at home, in your yard, or whatever it takes to keep them safe and happy. I want you guys to be as stress free as possible and for your dogs to enjoy life. Some days, that might mean skipping the walk.