

# Keep Your Dog Out Of Trouble On Walks

**Sarah Whitehead**

At a conference in the States last year, I was lucky enough to listen to many different speakers talking on a wide variety of topics. I always try to make a bee-line for any of the talks that sound new or different, and so I was fascinated by the idea of 'eco-therapy' for dogs and owners which was being presented.

After half an hour in the lecture theatre though, I had to suppress a rather wry smile. 'Eco-therapy', it turns out, is all about taking your dog for a walk in nature – rambling through woodland or open fields and enjoying the countryside together – really what I describe as walking the dog on an average day!

Of course, the idea that something so routine could be so unusual in another culture really brought it home to me just how lucky we are in the UK. I know that there is great variation between geographical areas in this country, but so many of us are fortunate to have simply wonderful places to walk our dogs, with relatively few restrictions or significant risks. Of course, this is not the same in other countries. Across the USA, dog parks are common, and these raise issues of behaviour and safety that we don't generally experience here.

Since returning to this country, I have been out and about, videoing dogs and owners when out on walks. This is as part of my research for a Masterclass on canine interactions and also for a new website venture. On the whole, I am impressed by the good social interactions that most dogs and owners have with each other when out on walks; after all, there is no real reason why dogs that are unknown to each other should be more than polite when they meet for the first time. However, I have also been a bit surprised by some owners and their rather laissez faire attitude to letting their dogs meet and greet others, and most especially by the lack of understanding about what might cause conflict between unknown dogs when they meet in the park.

While it is relatively unusual for dogs to be anything apart from friendly or politely indifferent when meeting other dogs outside, there are some situations which have the potential to ramp up excitement, tension or misunderstandings between dogs, and these can cause trouble. Perhaps we live in a society where 'socialisation' has become a bit of a buzz word, and owners interpret it as meaning that their dog needs to play with others to be happy and content. This is one myth that I would like to blow out of the water!

In essence, although it may be fun for us humans to watch our dogs play with other dogs, from our pets' point of view, play with other unknown dogs always has elements of risk to it. After all, play is a modified form of aggression – you only have to notice all the features of play that also occur in fights to see that this is true. In play (as in physical conflict), dogs use their mouths and teeth, they make physical contact with paws and body weight, they chase and pounce, and they make noises such as barking and growling. Now, while we all hope that we can tell the difference between happy play between dogs and over-arousal that is tipping into something less fun, the speed with which this can happen is frightening, and is certainly beyond the scope of the average person out with their dog for a stroll with their mind on other things.

Now, before I get accused of being the 'play police' I would say that whether or not it is a good idea to let your dog have a romp with someone else's pet is going to depend on lots of different factors. The first of these is just how aware both owners are! If one (or both!) of the owners are distracted (on the phone, chatting with someone else, enjoying a nice trance in the fresh air as they saunter along...), too far away, or lacking in basic control of their dog, then the inherent risks of the situation becoming out of control increase rapidly.

The dogs' own play style is also important – and this needs to be similar enough that the play between the two dogs is well balanced. Interestingly, this is much less to do with size and physical strength than it is to do with attitude and confidence. For example, on one of my video-carrying jaunts, I saw two Rhodesian Ridgebacks meet in the park for the first time. The owners were clearly enamoured to see another dog of the same breed in the same area, and stopped for a chat and to let the dogs interact. The meet and greet went well enough at first. The dogs were pretty much the same size, and although one was a male and the other a female, they were about the same age and looked like a good match. Play started, continued, and then – as the owners chatted about the joys of this lovely breed – started to get more and more exuberant. Over a period of only about four minutes, the dogs' play went from tentative and polite to down-right rude. What started out as two dogs taking it in turns to interact quickly became one-sided, as the female took it upon herself to roughly bite the male's neck and legs until she could finally trip him up and get him down onto the grass, where she pummelled him with her muzzle and front paws, preventing him from getting up.

The owners, barely noticing by this stage, laughed and called the boy a 'wuss' – never thinking that what both dogs were learning from the interaction was less than ideal. After several more intimidating muzzle-punches to the chest and abdomen, the male's patience ran out, and he pushed the female away, snapping and snarling to get enough distance between them so he could retreat behind his owner's legs. This was ignored, as the owners were still busy chuckling and chatting.

Of course, we can say that there was no great harm done in this interaction – after all, no dog or person was physically hurt, but from a behavioural point of view it was pretty much disastrous. Both dogs learned potentially damaging lessons. Meeting a similar dog next time, I wouldn't be surprised if the male wasn't more defensive, in less time, while the female discovered the fun of bullying a male which more than equalled her in size and strength. Sadly for the male, he also learned that when he needs his owners most, they abandon him.

So, what are the lessons here? First and foremost, watching your own and other people's dogs is essential when they are out on walks, especially when off lead. This is because you need to have your 'dog safety radar' on while walking, to ensure that you can successfully predict behaviour and protect your own dog if necessary. Don't leave them to fend for themselves, but keep a careful eye, and manage situations as they occur. Avoid other dogs if they appear to be out of control, on their own, or showing body language that might mean they enjoy a bit of drama. "He's only playing," is never a good excuse if one of the participants isn't enjoying the party.

Follow our top tips for safe walks. You can also print this out as a pdf from my website at [www.cleverdogcompany.com](http://www.cleverdogcompany.com)

Here's the QR code:



### **Predict and Protect!**

1. Keep your dog in sight and watch him carefully. He should look relaxed and happy. If he's tense, there's probably a good reason
2. Be aware: watch other dogs and owners. (Yes, this means turning off your mobile phone/earphones.) Follow your gut instincts; if in doubt about another dog approaching, turn and leave at speed!
3. Train a great recall, so you can get your dog out of trouble if need be. Don't be afraid to use treats with your own dog, but don't give them to others
4. Avoid meetings and greetings with other dogs on a tight lead. If someone else puts their dog on a lead, it's polite to do the same, or avoid them completely
5. Avoid large groups of unknown dogs – they can be intimidating for your dog
6. Avoid flashpoints which might cause tension; picnics, kids playing games, runners, dogs that are playing with toys or are chasing each other
7. Keep entrances and exits clear – a narrow area can be difficult for dogs to manoeuvre safely – they like to keep space between them
8. Keep moving. Most trouble between dogs occurs when owners are static
9. If your dog comes to you for help when out on a walk, help it! A dog that comes to its owner and goes behind them or jumps up is probably asking you to get it out of there...
10. Be honest about your own dog's behaviour – seek help if you need it