

When an off-leash dog charges toward you: how to stay safe and protect your dog

Many of us who live with dogs have experienced that gut-wrenching moment when an off-leash dog suddenly appears and comes barreling toward us. In an instant, adrenaline surges. Your heart pounds, your muscles tense and your breath catches as you brace for what might happen next. In the distance, you may see a human calling out without success. Then comes the familiar shout — *“Don’t worry, my dog is friendly!”* — a reassurance of intent that does nothing to reduce the very real risk to both dogs. And sometimes there isn’t a human in sight at all and the dog charging toward you looks intent on reaching your dog with the clear potential for conflict.

When this happens, our response can either stabilize the situation or unintentionally escalate it. Knowing what to do is not about overreacting, it’s about safety for everyone involved.

Why you need a plan

Before we talk about what to do, it’s important to understand *why* doing something matters.

When an unfamiliar dog approaches at speed, the guardian often tries to reassure you by describing their dog’s **intent**. But what matters is the **impact**.

Your dog is on leash. Your dog cannot move away, greet properly or offer natural appeasement signals. Your dog cannot assess or respond freely.

And the approaching dog — often racing forward with no ability to read subtle signals — may not see or respect your dog’s communication anyway. This sudden, unpredictable and often frightening event can have long-lasting emotional and behavioural consequences.

The risks are real:

- Physical injury to either dog or the humans involved.
- Increased fear or reactivity in already sensitive dogs.
- Significant setbacks for puppies in their socialization period.
- Legal and safety implications for the off-leash dog’s guardian.
- Emotional trauma that can alter future behaviour.

And of course, sometimes dogs are simply at large by accident. Things happen. But the impact on your dog is the same.

What you should do

1. Stay calm

This is the foundation of everything that follows.

When we panic, we shift into a reactive, survival-mode state. Our muscles tense, our breathing changes and we tighten the leash, all signals that can escalate the approaching dog's arousal and increase the risk of conflict.

When you stay calm:

- You remain connected to the thinking part of your brain.
- You make clearer, safer decisions.
- Your dog sees you taking charge.
- Your confidence helps your dog feel protected.

Calm guardians prevent more incidents than any tool ever will.

2. Reading the approaching dog

Understanding body language allows you to quickly assess risk.

If the approaching dog looks like this:

- Loose in the body
- Soft in the face
- Approaching with a moderate, wiggly gait
- Tail wagging low to mid-height

This dog is likely curious, not confrontational.

If the approaching dog is coming towards you like this:

- Racing forward with high arousal
- Leaning forward with intensity
- Tail high and stiff
- Mouth tight
- Eyes locked in

The dog may not intend harm, but the impact on your leashed dog can still trigger a stress response. Remember: your dog cannot respond naturally while restrained.

3. Use distance and barriers

Distance is your best friend. Move behind:

- A fence

- A parked car
- A tree
- A doorway
- Any object that breaks the direct line of sight

If no barrier is available, an umbrella can be an excellent tool. Acclimate your dog to the sound and movement of it opening at home. A large umbrella can act as a visual block and a physical shield, allowing you to keep the approaching dog on the other side while you and your dog stay protected.

4. Use food as a distraction

Always carry treats.

If a dog approaches, toss a handful of treats **directly at the dog's face**. The sudden appearance of food often interrupts forward motion and redirects the dog's attention long enough for you to move away safely.

6. Carry non-harmful deterrents

For emergencies, you can carry humane deterrents:

- A small air horn
- A Pet Corrector-style compressed air sound
- A water or citronella spray (last resort only)

These tools are not meant to punish. They are meant to interrupt. Build a toolkit that aligns with your comfort level and your dog's needs.

What you should NOT do!

These actions can escalate the situation and increase risk:

- Do not panic.
- Do not scream or flail. Sudden movement increases arousal.
- Do not run. This triggers chase instinct.
- Do not tighten the leash. Leash tension increases your dog's stress and can provoke a reaction.
- Do not look away. Always keep the approaching dog in sight.
- Do not reach between dogs. Even your own dog may bite in a moment of high arousal.

Your safety matters just as much as your dog's.

6. Practice your plan

Once you know what to do, practice it.

Rehearse scenarios in your mind. Practice positioning your dog behind you or between your legs. Practice opening your umbrella quickly. Practice tossing treats with accuracy.

This type of mental and physical rehearsal, called **cognitive rehearsal**, is well-documented in emergency response research. People who rehearse are less likely to panic, freeze or make unsafe decisions. Their plan activates automatically when needed. This is how people appear “heroic” in emergencies. They prepared.

This all may sound scary, but not every off-leash encounter ends badly. When we stay calm, read the situation accurately and respond with intention, we dramatically reduce risk.

- Keep your leash loose.
- Don't assume the approaching dog has bad intentions.
- Learn to read body language.
- Practice your emergency plan until it becomes second nature.

Your walk with your dog should be peaceful and enriching. As your dog's advocate, being prepared for the unexpected can turn a potentially frightening moment into a non-event.

Stay safe out there.

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