



What Do I Do If I am Working with a Client's Dog and a Stray Dog Approaches?

Whether you train in a city, a suburban neighborhood, or a rural area, chances are that at some point, while working with a client's dog in public, you will encounter a stray dog. This is a potentially dangerous scenario, not only because the dog you are working with might be dog-aggressive, but because of the unknown temperament of the stray. Being prepared can help you to avoid a situation that is unsafe for both dogs, and possibly even litigious, should the client's dog be injured and you be held responsible.

An Ounce of Prevention

Have a safety preparedness discussion with your client before you begin to train outdoors. Explain that if a stray dog shows up, you will handle the situation. The owner's job is to keep her own dog safe. If her dog is a small one, she should pick him up and turn and walk away. If the dog is too big to lift, she should walk him away as calmly and quickly as possible.

Because people tend to freeze up in emergency situations, it's a good idea to practice ahead of time. Tell your client that whenever you say, "Grab your dog!" it means she should remove her dog from the area immediately as discussed. Practice the exercise on walks now and then to ensure that the owner becomes accustomed to performing the actions before they are actually needed. If a stray dog appears, chances are much higher that your client will comply with your instructions at once.

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So how exactly should you deal with the stray while your client is ensuring her own dog's safety? It depends on the individual dog. If the stray does not appear threatening, your best course of action is to take a large handful

of treats and toss them with an underhand motion behind the dog, scattering them as widely as possible. While the dog is intent on picking up each morsel, you and your client can safely retreat in the other direction. Another tactic for non-threatening dogs is to face the dog, draw yourself up to full height, and sternly say, “Go home!” while giving an authoritative wave of your arm. But use caution—if you’re not sure whether a stray is friendly, don’t chance increasing his arousal levels by becoming threatening yourself. The goal is to defuse the situation with as little confrontation as possible.

If a stray dog is moving toward you in a threatening manner and you are carrying SprayShield™, this is the time to use it (so long as the wind is not blowing in your direction). Spray it directly into the dog’s face. It won’t harm the dog, and should give you enough time to get to safety. If you are carrying an air horn, the sound may be enough to scare the dog off; it will also alert others if you need help. (Avoid using an air horn if your client’s dog is noise-sensitive.) If necessary, pick up a nearby rock or other solid object and hurl it in the stray’s direction, aiming for the ground next to the dog. This should be enough to scare the stray away, especially if you use your voice in an assertive manner along with it.

Threats to Your Personal Safety

The chances of a stray dog actually attacking you are slim, but it’s important to know what to do if it happens. Chances are you will not be able to outrun the dog, and besides, running would only trigger the dog’s chase drive and escalate his arousal levels. If there is a car nearby, climb up onto the roof and call for help. Perhaps the Trainer-on-the-Roof scenario isn’t the most dignified, but it is immensely useful for keeping your limbs intact. If there aren’t any cars or anything else close by to climb on, but there is a nearby gate or doorway, get yourself on the other side of it as quickly as possible. Then either find assistance or wait for the dog to leave.

But what if you can’t easily retreat, and the dog is actually attacking you? Many safety manuals advise that if you cannot get away from an aggressive dog, you should curl up in a fetal position and cover your face. I relay this information because it is the accepted “right” thing to do, and is probably a very valuable tactic for children. There is obvious value in bearing the brunt of an attack on your limbs rather than on your face or torso. But unless the dog actually knocks you to the ground, I do

not advise the fetal curl tactic. There is no way I would voluntarily surrender the advantage of an upright position if a dog were attacking me. In fact, I know very few trainers who would. Get a solid object between you and the dog if possible. Or, if you are holding a jacket or other soft item, stuff it in the dog's mouth. If there is no chance of retreat and no chance of using the aforementioned techniques, do whatever you have to in order to defend yourself and get out of the situation. Kicking is safer than using your hands or arms, as your legs are normally more protected, assuming you are wearing those thick jeans we discussed back in Chapter Ten. For women, the lower body is stronger than the upper—another reason to remain upright if you are a female.

No one wants to think about hurting a dog, but it is best to consider now what to do if the worst happens. In the event that you must defend yourself, you do not want to waste precious seconds wondering what to do.

Again, the likelihood of a stray dog attacking you is slim. The chances of a stray getting into a fight with a dog you are working with, especially if that dog is dog-aggressive, are higher. In the event that your client's dog is actually fighting with the stray, break it up (specific instructions for how to break up a dog fight are coming up in Chapter Twenty-three), get your client and her dog to safety, and then discuss what happened and why. Explain to your client how to keep her dog safe on walks when you are not there by carrying SprayShield™, an air horn, or a small folding umbrella that can be opened in the direction of the approaching dog. Above all, remember that the calmer you stay in any situation where a dog is highly aroused, the safer the outcome for everyone.