

OFF LEAD DOG AREAS

Free running must not be a free for all

A woman with her dogs on lead enters a free run park where about a dozen dogs are off lead. Even before she can unleash, several dogs mob her causing one of her dogs to screech in fright. The remaining dogs in the park converge towards the slight disturbance. Their bodies are taut and erect, tails held high. Their owners watch on, not recognising the signals the dogs are giving. Without intervention, a serious incident is about to take place

Off Lead Area Dynamics

The above scenario is true. Fortunately there were two dog owners in the park that day that *could* read the early signs and managed to convince the other dog owners to recall their dogs (some with limited degrees of success). While “scuffles” in the off lead areas may be dismissed by many dog owners, they point to the probability of more serious behaviours developing if not properly managed.

A high number of dogs present in an off lead area can, if handlers are unaware, result in the formation of a pack. Even a minor incident can heighten dogs’ already raised arousal levels. Highly aroused dogs in a pack situation can be extremely unpredictable and behave in ways guaranteed to shock their owners.

Outside of dog attacks, poorly controlled dogs in off lead areas can learn a variety of undesirable behaviours. These include fear, aggression, very rough play and ignoring their handlers. If your dog ignores your cues in an off-lead situation, not only are you undermining your training, you are putting your dog, yourself *and* others at risk.

You place your dog’s safety in the hands of others every time you enter an off lead park. The key issue with off lead running is that the safety of each dog and handler using the area is completely dependent on the knowledge and control of all the other dog handlers in the park – and that knowledge and control will vary widely.

Understanding Dog Behaviour in Off Lead Situations

Meeting and Greeting

Canines are territorial, pack animals that do not normally tolerate the presence of strangers. Centuries of selective breeding and careful socialisation have decreased these characteristics in domestic dogs. However, some dogs are not particularly tolerant of strange dogs or lack the social skills to greet and mix with new dogs in an appropriate manner.

Properly conducted dog socialisation aims to teach dogs the correct “etiquette” of meeting and greeting. Dogs that haven’t learned such etiquette can trigger aggression in other dogs. Many owners who consider their dogs “friendly” are unaware that their pooches are actually behaving very rudely in dog terms. Rushing into another dog’s

space, direct head to head initial contact or bouncing on a strange dog are all “rude” in dog language. An intolerant dog may react aggressively to such an approach. A pup, a timid dog or a smaller dog may be badly frightened.

Pack Instinct

Gather three or more dogs and place them together and your gentle pet will begin to display pack instincts. The better a large number of dogs know one another, the stronger the pack instinct will become. Dogs that run regularly together in an off lead area may develop strong pack instincts. In this situation your dog may behave in ways you have never seen before.

Pack behaviour has a tendency to provoke very powerful prey drives, even in the mildest mannered dog. In a free run area one or two dogs, particularly small dogs or pups, can become the targets of those powerful pack prey drives with members of the pack getting their ‘fun’ out of harassing or chasing the ‘victims’.

Aggression

ALL dogs carry the potential to express aggressive behaviours, but not all dogs show the same levels of aggression. Levels of aggression are dependent on three factors:

- motivation: *preparedness to respond to stimuli*
- arousal threshold: *level of stimulus that triggers the response*
- reactivity: *the combined effect of both motivation and arousal¹*

Motivation

Some dogs are described as “fear aggressive” others are “intolerant of strangers”, “dominant” or “prepared to finish what another starts”. All of these types of dog possess the motivation to behave aggressively towards other dogs.

Arousal

Arousal is the trigger that produces behaviour. Some dogs are easily aroused, others are more phlegmatic.

Triggers to arousal include conditioned excitement (i.e. learned by exposure to certain situations or locations), high drive situations such as running in packs or chasing balls, and unfamiliar situations.

Signs of high arousal in a dog include:

- High pitched barking
 - Ears held forward or erect
 - Taut, stilted body language
 - A tail held stiffly and higher than normal,
 - Slow, deliberate tail wagging
 - Piloerection (raised hair on neck, shoulders or other areas of the body)
 - Dilated pupils
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Most dogs in an off leash area will be in a higher than normal arousal state. Studies have shown that a dog in very high state of arousal can divert parts of its brain function away from hearing and towards sight and locomotion. Thus your ability to control your dog can be severely diminished. To avoid an incident, a dog in a high state of arousal should not be allowed to run off lead in a public area – a time out is in order.

Reactivity

In the reactive dog, the behaviour response to a stimulus is quick. Couple any trigger to arousal with a reactive dog in an off lead area and you have a highly volatile situation. A dog of any breed may be highly reactive.

Prevention – How To Be Safe In An Off Lead Area

To use an off leash area safely you need to prevent dogs from becoming highly aroused or forming packs. Prevention is not difficult if all handlers can be encouraged to cooperate in monitoring and controlling their dogs. Speak to the regulars in your park. Some tips are:-

- **Observe the Area Before Entering.** How busy is the park? Are handlers spread out and watching their dogs? Are the dogs behaving appropriately? If you don't like what you see, don't enter.
- **Enter on lead and remove your lead while your dog is sitting.** Making your dog sit ensures that he is still capable of focussing on you and obeying you. Remove the lead quickly (some on lead dogs can be aggressive to others) and move away from the entrance.
- **Spread out.** Dogs tend to mill around their handlers, so don't stand in a clump. This encourages the formation of packs. You will have a better view of your dog and more control over events if you are spread out.
- **Keep Moving** If you move and keep your dog's focus on you, you may prevent him from becoming too aroused by the sights and sounds of the park..
- **Watch your dog.** Your dog's behaviour is your responsibility - even while socialising with the other people, keep your eyes on your dog. Many aggression incidents begin because the handler is distracted. Calling your dog to you at the right time can prevent an incident.
- **Read dog behaviours.** Learn about dog body language to keep your dog out of trouble. In particular, you should learn to recognise signs of high arousal so if your dog is getting too excited you can give him a time out to calm him down, or put him on lead and leave.
- **Watch for packs forming.** Dogs in a group will often form a pack to chase or pick on another individual dog. If more than two dogs are involved in one activity, stop the behaviour by calling the dogs and taking them to different parts of the park.
- **Train Your Dog in the Park.** Use the time in the park to practise a couple of recalls from distractions. If feasible, do it in cooperation with others in the park for 'group recall'. Your ability to call your dog out of a developing situation is an important safety skill.
- **Know Your Dog.** If your dog's recall under distraction is unreliable or your dog has any kind of aggression issue, busy off lead areas should be avoided.

You should also avoid busy off lead areas if your dog is a pup, very old, or timid. If your dog is highly reactive, watch its arousal levels and remove it from the area before it becomes too excited.

- **Be Careful with Motivators.** Many dogs are possessive of food, balls and other toys. Using them in a busy off lead situation may produce resource guarding aggression. Don't throw balls and toys and only use food with discretion. Don't feed other dogs or feed yours when other dogs are focussing on your food supply.

Above all, keep your eyes open and use your common sense to prevent or diffuse a situation before it can escalate.

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