



## **City Sidewalks and Dog 101** **By Gary Weitzman, DVM**

I was walking my two dogs on East Capital Street last week when a jogger, large Labrador in hand, ran right in between me and the person I was talking to. Literally. I was astonished. Not that it makes any difference, but I don't have small dogs. Or unintimidating dogs. One is a 110-pound German shepherd, and the other a small-ish, but still substantial, pit bull. Nothing transpired, except my chin dropping nearly to the sidewalk in surprise. Clearly both dogs combined had more intelligence than this jogger.

We hear many tragic cases of dog interactions going badly. The truth is though, it's not always, or even usually, the dogs' fault. Dogs are dogs. We are humans. We're supposed to know better.

A few months ago, we all heard the terrible story of the pit bull who grabbed another small dog at Lincoln Park—to the horror of both dogs' owners, and to the tune of probably \$1,000 of dog repair bills. It could have been so much worse. Again, not the dogs' fault. They were just being dogs. It's their people who dropped the ball. Maybe literally, but at least figuratively, to be sure. By denying the true nature of their beasts, they put both dogs in grave peril.

We get dogs from the most complicated situations in the world at the Washington Animal Rescue League. From puppy mills, hoarders, other shelter fires, from foreclosures and natural disasters. Or just from people surrendering them because they no longer want to put in the work to make their dog a success. Yes, it can be a lot of work. But it's tragic nonetheless. Dogs need training. Not to do parlor tricks. That's frosting on the cake. They have to be worked with by trainers just to live in a house, never mind learn to drop a chicken bone from the gutter, or come when we call them. Of course it's a lot of work to train dogs; to modify some of those natural behaviors that just don't work in a human environment. Especially a city one in which we're all living on top of each other. But some common sense goes a long way.

So here's my living-successfully-with-your-dog lesson 101. In five easy steps. (1) The first is to believe in reality. Some dogs just don't like other dogs. Or people. And some are, as we like to say "reactive," which means their buttons get pushed whenever they see another dog, or person, or squirrel, or falling leaf. Or whatever. It's their nature. And we've got all of those triggers on our streets.

(2) The second rule is that some dogs don't do very well at the dog park, whether it's one of our new official dog parks, or Congressional Cemetery, or Stanton Park's race-around-the-horse-statue dog play area. These are built with the best of intentions, but are the least manageable places to secure your dog from anything other than cars. I'm talking about the official dog parks. You're on your own with the traffic at our lovely people parks. To many dogs, a dog park is a big, bad cocktail party, where everyone is drunk and trying to grab the last tray of pigs-in-a-blanket. It's not pretty.

(3) Rule number 3 is that yes, you do have to do some training. All dogs benefit from this. And they enjoy it. Dogs, like all of us, need boundaries to be successful in our world. So train them and don't give in to every one of their whims. Would you do that with your human kids? Of course not. But we're talking positive training. By all means go to a positive, Certified Pet Dog Trainer. And bribe, bribe, bribe. That's why probably three-quarters of a dog's brain is devoted to smell and taste! Food is magic. And it works for training. You should take every aversive training tool, prong collar, electric collar (the worst!), and choke chain, and place them under your right rear car wheel and drive over them. Twice. For reactive dogs, these only make things worse. For other dogs, they're just cruel.

(4) Get control of yourself, and your dog. If you have trouble exercising control, by all means keep your dog on a leash. And not those retractable leashes. Put those under your back wheel, too. They do the opposite of what a leash is supposed to do. If you want to let your dog roam into every bush, driveway, neighbor's petunia garden, other dog, and mud puddle, go right ahead. But when your neighbor gets mad at you, or you need to get your pup back in a hurry, you're just kidding yourself if you think you can do this with the magic touch of a button. And for heaven's sake, get a harness or gentle leader if your dog becomes a whirling dervish in a neck collar. They make all the difference in the world.

(5) And finally, be a human. Control what you can control in life. We can't control the recession, the price of gas, or Congress, but we can, and have an obligation to control our dogs. That means don't rush across the street to meet the fluffy schnauzers living two blocks away from you. Or the pit bull (they are absolute gems of dogs, but ask first before approaching any dog). In other words, don't run smilingly to meet the neighbor's dogs if you're not sure what the neighbors dogs are like. Ok, better than that, assume that no dog is a bomb-proof, safe hound in a city. And for heaven's sake, don't run your dogs through a group of other dogs on leash, or kids chalking in a hop scotch course on the sidewalk. Cross to the other side if you can. We'll take turns.

Keep control of your dog. Just because your dog lives to meet other dogs, that doesn't mean other dogs want to meet yours. Be safe. And keep your dog safe. That means good parenting, some common sense, boundaries, and a plastic bag. We're lucky to have our wonderful cherry-blossomed, maple-covered city streets in our neighborhoods to walk our best friends. Just be aware of your surroundings, set some boundaries, and ask first before approaching a human and his dog. We're all just trying to get our pups safely walked and home before dinner, too.

Gary Weitzman, DVM, is the CEO of the Washington Animal Rescue League, where there are dozens of positive training classes, reactive dog classes, and even free behavior advice. You can also hear Dr. Weitzman give advice to the animal-exasperated every Saturday at noon on WAMU FM 88.5 The Animal House . To reach the author, email him at [gweitzman@warl.org](mailto:gweitzman@warl.org).