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Lost Dog! Planning, Prevention, Response

I've put together these tips for my training clients, family and friends. I hope you'll find them helpful and share them with the dog lovers in your life!

Planning ahead is key. Is your dog chipped? That's a must. Is the information up to date with your current contact info? Also a must. Do we have the most appropriate collar, harness or other equipment for our dog's breed and temperament and it is fitted appropriately and in perfect condition? Do we have a contact list of friends, neighbors, dog walkers, trainers, doormen that we've compiled in advance of any misadventure? Every family member, staff member, friend or dog handler knows the safety protocols we have in place, right? Great. Lastly, do we know our dog? Is s/he shy? Prey driven? A herding dog by nature? Is s/he aggressive, impulsive, fearful, fearless? Knowing our dogs is paramount to keeping them safe.

Prevention is our next responsibility. Treat your dog's equipment like you would your car, your bike, your helicopter! Check it frequently for fit and condition because his/her life depends on it. This next one is huge: should I have my dog off-leash? We have a culture in our area that encourages off-leash play. That can be an exciting, joyful time for our dogs and ourselves. But off-leash time is not appropriate for every dog. Is your dog in an unfamiliar area? Is s/he prone to independent walkabouts or unpredictable zoomies? Does s/he spook easily around loud noises, reactive dogs, kids? Does your dog have excellent, instant recall from any distance, at any time, in the face of any distraction? Researchers compare the intelligence of dogs to a toddler of about 2 years of age. Would I let my toddler who is lightning quick, prone to chasing squirrels and has very little impulse control roam around the park unattended? Of course not, that would be crazy!

Instant response in the first five seconds may save your dog's life. Hopefully you've trained your dog to have great recall. Hopefully you've planned and prepared for this moment many times. Hopefully your kids, your walker and your friends have rehearsed this moment because it is going to happen. Period. No matter how much planning and how carefully we've tried to prevent this, it is a fact of life. If people take away one tip for improving the odds of recovery, I hope it's this one: DO NOT CHASE THE DOG. Coax the frightened pup and GET DOWN! Use your words: "Good boy, do you want a treat? Come here, sweet doggie. It's OK. Cookie?" Pull out at all the stops. Entice the pup and squat or even lie down. Smile, stay calm, look away, de-escalate. As with people, a panicked frantic, terrified response will encourage the same in our escapee. We want the opposite: "I'm happy, you're happy, no reason to be alarmed." As with any emergency situation you'll need to manage bystanders and instantly implement your search and recovery plan. You've made it this far, don't give up!

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