

Dog Park Etiquette

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See www.safehaborvet.com for information on lots of topics and our adoptable pets.

Proper Canine Manners for Dogs at the Dog Park

For a well-behaved dog with a knowledgeable owner, a dog park can be a little bit of heaven on earth. Dog parks provide something many of us don't have at home. A large fenced area for our pets to romp and play in and access to a big, huge puppy party! After a few hours at the park, your pooch will be ready for a nap. Remember, a tired dog is a happy dog which usually translates into a happy owner!

When discussing dog parks, it's important to remember that there are two types available. The first is the privately owned, typically pay to play, type of park. In general, these parks are usually larger, have more amenities available and have much more stringent rules concerning aggressive dogs and vaccination/parasite check requirements.

The typically free "public" dog park can also be enjoyable, but be aware, these parks are based on an "honor system" and may have little to no monitoring.

In either park, it's important to find groups with dogs who really enjoy romping together. Just like kids, not all pups will get along well together.

It's important to make absolutely certain your pet is completely up to date on all vaccinations by contacting your veterinarian prior to visiting a dog park.

1. Is the dog park right for you and your dog?

Are YOU right for the park?: Do you have good, basic knowledge of dog behavior and body language. Do you know how to tell whether a pup is playing or being aggressive? Do you have good, verbal control over your pet? Your pup should at least know the commands "Leave it" and "Come" before taking him to a dog park. Are you willing to play by the rules (i.e. pick up after your pet, leave the park if your pet is causing trouble, pay for any damages caused by your pet. etc.).

Is your DOG right for the park?: Does she enjoy playing with other dogs? Does she play well with others without becoming aggressive? Will she listen to you even if she's distracted with play?

Is the PARK right for your dog? The park should require proof of up to date distemper/parvo, bordetella and rabies vaccinations and negative fecal examinations. Dogs known to have had aggression issues should not be allowed inside the park. Some parks have separate play areas for smaller or timid dogs which may be an important consideration for you.

2. If your dog is aggressive, what should you do?

If you know your dog has aggressive tendencies toward other dogs. Please, use common sense and keep him at home. Avoiding a potentially dangerous fight is much better than trying to break it up.

Just like kids on a playground, dogs in a dog park will be prone to scuffles. The vast majority of these will be minor, however, it is up to us to be able to assess whether a scuffle is going to escalate into a full blown fight. If the scuffle appears to be all bark and no bite, count to "one three thousand". Usually by that time, a simple scuffle will have ended. If either dog actually has a hold of the other, you will need to break things up and move to a different section of the park or end the session for the day. Avoid dogs with tense or aggressive body language. If the dogs continue to scuffle, institute a 3-5 minute "time out" to allow both parties to calm down. Do not yell at dogs that are having a minor disagreement as this can cause the situation to escalate. Telling your dog "No" or "come" if you feel he will listen, may be productive. Obviously, if your pet shows continued aggression, he should not be taken to the dog park and you should seek professional advice.

If you need to break up an actual dog fight, do so with extreme caution as even the best behaved pup may bite their owner accidentally in the heat of the moment. No matter how great your relationship is with your pet, you CAN be bitten as your pet is in survival mode.

Do not grab the dogs by their collars, instead grab the hind feet of each dog, lift upward, walk backward and in a large circle with the dog's hind end in the air. This sounds ridiculous, but is the safest way to break up a dog fight if the dogs don't already have leashes on them to use. This only works if you have two people available. Don't let go of the dogs until you have them in separate areas. When your dog has settled down, check closely for injuries. Take your pet to the veterinarian immediately if any wounds are noted.

3. First Time Dog Owners: What to expect.

If you've never been to a dog park before, it's a really good idea to visit a couple of times without your dog to get an idea of what to expect. Watch the dogs playing and observe their body language. Also, watch the owners, do they tend to overreact if their dogs are in a minor scuffle or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, do they completely ignore their aggressive dog who is causing fights? If the situation seems good, by all means bring your pup the next time. If something doesn't seem right, listen to your gut feeling and leave Fido at home. Ask your veterinarian and local positive reinforcement dog trainer what parks they recommend.

Get to know the owners of the dogs present. Ask them questions about their pet's backgrounds. You'll likely make some great new human, as well as canine, friends.

Expect that you'll meet both people and pets that you'll both like and dislike. Some parks have scheduled times for certain groups of people or pets to meet. Often, the park participants will arrange to meet at specific times so their compatible pets can play together.

Rules are typically posted at the front gate(s) of the park. Expect to follow them. Don't bring treats or chewies into the park. These can cause possessive aggression.

A word of caution. Because there are large numbers of big dogs running around at high rates of speed, the dog park is no place for small children. The potential for accidental injury is too great.

4. Little dogs vs Big dogs:

If your little guy typically has no trouble holding his own with a larger dog friend, by all means, give the "big dog" side of the park a try. Be ready to remove your dog though if he's having trouble getting knocked around by the pack. Most parks either have scheduled "little dog" times or a separate area for the wee ones.

5. Males vs. females

Generally speaking, most of the time gender is not an issue as long as the pets present have been altered. Most gender related issues revolve around un-neutered males or un-spayed females. Same sex aggression being the most common problem. 70% of all dog bites are caused by un-neutered males. Use caution if you notice someone bring an intact male or female dog into the park. Particularly if the female is in heat or if the male is exhibiting any aggressive body language.

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