



Dog Park Etiquette and Safety

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So you're thinking of hitting your local dog park? Well, let's talk about how to make it the best experience for everyone!

Dog parks can benefit dogs and their owners in numerous important ways. But like anything worth having, they come with a price. That price is responsible ownership. Below we touch on some of the advantages a dog park brings to a community as well as the regulations that its patrons must adhere to in order to make the park safe and enjoyable for everyone. By following common sense guidelines, a dog park has the potential to create healthier and happier dogs, bring you and your dog closer together and introduce you to people who share your sense of the human-canine bond.

Advantages to Dog Park Use:

- Provides an excellent opportunity to socialize with other dogs.
- Dogs can and will learn necessary behavioral lessons from other dogs.
- An abundance of stimuli and exercise that can send your dog home tired and happy.
- A forum to meet other people who appreciate your bond with your animal.

Potential Disadvantages to Dog Park Use:

- One negative experience can create future behavioral concerns for your pet.
- Using a dog park too frequently can create a dog that requires too much stimuli in order to "be tired" – you don't want to build that kind of tolerance in your dog.
- Stressful events that may occur in dog parks can create a strong chemical change in your dog's brain. Those chemical changes, can and do interfere with your dog's ability to process and cope with novel stimuli outside of the park environment.

Some Very Basic Guidelines:

- Dogs under 16 weeks and older dogs which are not current on their full compliment of vaccinations should not come into the dog park area. Same goes for dogs who may be feeling ill.
- Any dog that has a history of aggression towards other dogs should not come into the dog park area.
- If the park seems overcrowded, then it probably is! Overcrowding stresses the animals and may ultimately lead to altercations. You and your dog will both be happier if you come back after the crowd has thinned out. The bigger the park, the better – always.
- Always use your best judgment and instincts when it comes to other dogs. If you or your dog does not feel comfortable with another dog in the park, **leave**. Do not allow another owner to talk you into believing their dog is not a threat.
- Consider infrequent use, such as 1 – 2 visits per week, lasting no more than 30 minutes in length. Dogs, just like kids, can behave inappropriately after extended playtime.

Recommendations for Dogs:

- Dogs entering the park should have a reliable recall (come).
- Dogs at the park should have **no history** of dog to dog or dog to human aggression (We can't stress this enough!).
- Wear a regular collar, as choker-style collars can get tangled during play and cause serious injury; however dogs have been known to get tangled even with regular collars.
- In pursuit of setting everyone up for successful use of the park, your dog should be spayed or neutered.

Recommendations for Humans:

- Treats are not a great idea for the park, as some dogs don't share very well.
- Always have poop bags.
- Have a cell phone with you in case of emergency.
- Realize that not everyone may agree with your ideas about dog training and behavior. Be prepared to agree to disagree!
- Consider taking a class or reading some information to best educate yourself about canine language and communication.

If an Altercation Occurs:

- Keep in mind that most dog arguments are simply ritualized vocalization and/or physical maneuvering. In most cases, dogs are not trying to hurt each other, but vying for things like status or position closest to a ball.
- Do not get in between fighting dogs, as this is how most injuries occur.
- Make a series of deep, loud and earth-shattering sounds in an attempt to verbally distract the dogs.
- If you have water or a jacket, use the water or your coat to distract the dogs by actually throwing those items at the dogs.
- If the above suggestions do not separate the dogs, follow the following instructions:
 - Go to the rear of your dog.
 - Keeping your face as far away as possible, place both hands under the back hips of your dog, near the genital area and gently pull upwards. Typically this will work to distract your dog enough so that the altercation will cease.

Other things to keep in mind:

- ❖ If your dog does not enjoy the style of play that occurs at dog parks, take him hiking or on long walks where he will run into other dogs in a friendly, non-confrontational way.
- ❖ Not all dogs want to play with other dogs in a chaotic environment. Shy or fearful dogs may look like they are coping okay, but in fact, may just be shutting down in order to stay out of trouble.
- ❖ Overuse of off lead dog parks can make it more difficult for you to control your dog on a short lead when he or she encounters a dog on your walks. If you are seeing this occur, talk to a trainer who uses scientific, positive and dog-friendly training methods.
- ❖ In hot weather, dogs can overheat very quickly. Stay out of high energy environments when the temps are high!

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