

# Dog Parks

Many people are excited to take their dog to a dog park but forget to ask their dog if they would enjoy going. Dog parks can be a great place for dogs to burn off some energy off leash and interact with other dogs but if your dog does not enjoy the dog park, or if there are other dogs at the dog park that shouldn't be there, it can mean life changing consequences for your dog and their behavior.

For dogs and owners that do want to go to dog parks, there are some very important things that we, as pet owners, need to be aware of to make sure you and your dog have a good time and stay safe at the dog park.

## Rules to Follow

Your dog needs to be spayed/neutered before going to a dog park. Most dog parks do not allow unaltered animals into dog parks but dog parks are unregulated by anyone other than the pet owners that are visiting with their dogs. It is your duty, as a pet owner to make sure that everyone is following the rules inside the dog park. If there are people that are not following the rules you can either direct their attention to the rules or you can collect your dog and leave.

Always watch your dog while you are at the dog park. If your dog gets into trouble with another dog, or person, you will need to be prepared to step in immediately and redirect your dog out of harm's way. Be sure to praise your dog for the things that you like, such as coming over to check in with you (or say "hi" before running away again to play with friends).

All dogs should be off leash and should not be wearing any type of remote training equipment (remote shock collars). Keeping a dog on a leash or using a remote training collar inside of a dog park can make that dog's behavior unpredictable since they do not have full control of its own decisions. If you see someone in the dog park that refuses to take their dog's leash or remote collar off you should direct their attention to the dog park rules or collect your dog and leave.

Children under the age of 12 should not visit dog parks. Dogs can knock children over by running by them or jumping on them. Dogs can also react negatively towards children if they aren't used to them or they are afraid of them. For these reasons, it is safest to visit the dog park with older children or no children. If someone brings in their small kids to the dog park, direct them to the dog park rules or collect your dog and leave. If your dog injures a person or another dog at the dog park, you could be held liable legally and financially.

Look for dog parks with multiple entrance gates. Entering the dog park can be the most stressful part of the entire visit since most dogs tend to crowd around the gates when a new dog comes in – which limits the dog's ability to avoid conflict. Imagine if you were forced through a small doorway into a crowd of people that want to put their face in your face and touch you without asking permission. Consider visiting dog parks that have two or more entrance gates and consider bringing along a 2 legged friend to help you get the other dog's attention so your dog can enter without being crowded. Avoid your dog getting buried by other dogs by clearing a path for your dog using your body to walk through the crowd of dogs. If there are too many dogs, try using an alternate entrance point or leave the dog park and take your dog for a solo walk.

When approaching a dog you should avoid direct eye contact—this is confrontational behavior. Turn to the side when greeting a dog—this position is less invasive. And talk in a happy and pleasant voice, avoid hugging or patting the head roughly and making erratic movements or sudden noises.

Look for a dog park with play equipment. Some dog parks have ramps, platforms, water features, hills, and other interactive objects for dogs to run on/through, over and under. Other dog parks may just be fenced in flat land. If your dog only loves to run or interact with other dogs then these might be okay but most dogs like to have obstacles to climb on or in as well as running and playing with other dogs. Imagine taking a group of kids to an open field to "play." Without things to play with they may run out of ideas on how to entertain themselves fast. Take those same kids to a playground and they instantly find new ways to play – the same goes for dogs.

Have some understanding of dog body language and your dog's play style. Dogs that indicate a desire to play such as play bows, and a generally loose and happy body language indicate that things are going well. Behaviors such as the hair on their back or shoulders standing up, growling, teeth baring, rigid body tension, running away with tail tucked can indicate that one or both dogs are uncomfortable with the interaction. If you notice these types of communications, interrupt both dogs and call them away. If you have to interrupt more than two times, it is probably best to leave the dog park for the day so that you do not risk your dog being exposed to aggressive or unwanted behavior. Mounting other dogs is usually not a sexual behavior, it is most often caused by arousal from play or conflict in the dog's knowledge of how to play. The mounting dog may also display other pushy behaviors such as placing the head or feet on or over another dog's shoulder. If this behavior is allowed to continue it may escalate into fighting, which either dog may initiate.

Dog parks are unsafe for animals that are not fully vaccinated. Since dog parks cannot be sanitized fully and vaccination status of animals is often never checked before an animal is allowed in, make sure your dog is fully vaccinated and healthy before visiting the dog park.