

Setting Up for Success at the Dog Park

On Your First Visit

Prepare for your dog's first visit by exploring the dog park without your dog. Enter the off-leash area, walk around, and feel free to ask questions of anyone in the park. Then, when you bring your dog for the first time, you will be prepared to guide your dog appropriately and less likely to walk into surprises.

The first time your dog comes to the park, try to visit at a relatively quiet time of day so that your dog can experience this new place without being overwhelmed by potential playmates. Most parks experience peak usage early in the morning, after work hours on weekdays and at midday on weekends; regular users of the Doylestown Dog Park can tell you when it tends to be most busy or quiet.

When you arrive, stand outside the fence and watch the dogs inside the off-leash area for a few minutes before you enter it. Ask yourself the following questions before deciding to enter:

- Does your dog already know any of the dogs in the park?
- Are they playing in a manner that is comfortable for your dog?
- Does your dog look keen to enter or reluctant?

If your dog seems afraid or reluctant to enter, remember that it is better to leave and come back at another time rather than set your dog up for trouble on the first visit. If you decide to enter the off-leash area proceed through the double-gated entrance as described in the section *Entering and Exiting the Park (page 9)*.

- Be aware that dogs that are already in the larger fenced-in area will likely gather around the gate to "meet and greet" your dog.
- Allow your dog to remain in the enclosed area for a few minutes until the other dogs retreat from the entrance area.
- When you AND your dog feel comfortable, open the second gate and let your unleashed dog enter the play area (leashed dogs tend to become frightened or defensive if suddenly surrounded by other dogs).
- Close the second gate behind you and follow your dog into the play area.

On Every Visit

Before entering, assess how many dogs are already playing in the park, the intensity of the play, and whether their owners are paying attention. Does this look like an appropriate situation for your dog? If not, come back at another time. If you decide to go in, please turn off your cell phone so that it cannot distract your attention from your dog.

The entry and exit to both the "Large" and "Small" off-leash areas are double-gated. If someone is entering/exiting in front of you, wait until the area is clear and both gates are secure before entering. Do not enter or exit as a group.

Inside the park, keep moving. Dogs tend to play more when their owners are in motion; An owner standing or sitting in one place makes it more likely for a dog to guard the surrounding space. While your dog plays, stay engaged: call your dog periodically, praise and reward, and then say, "Go play!" to put what he is going to do on your queue. Have your dog take occasional breaks from play to make over-arousal less likely.

Many dogs pay acute attention to who is entering a dog park, and sometimes dogs will bunch up at the entryway as another is entering. If an entering dog is swarmed and feels threatened, a fight can erupt. The person inside the entryway should wait until the dogs disperse or the owners inside the off-leash area call their dogs away from the gate before allowing the dog(s) in.

If another dog owner is not following the posted rules, politely approach that person and ask for cooperation. It may be more comfortable if you ask another dog owner to accompany you. You are the only person who is responsible for your dog's safety and well-being, and all of us are responsible for the well-being of the park.

When you leave, leash your dog in the double-gated vestibule before returning to the lobby area. Afterward, think your experience over: What did your dog learn? What did you learn?

Dog Park Etiquette

By Nicole Larocco, CPDT & Behavior Consultant - www.thatsagooddog.com

For many pet owners, dog parks are a god send! They are a way to exercise your athletic dog after you've been at work all day, socialize a young dog, and even meet new friends (for you and your dog!). But a dog park can also be dangerous when we are not watching our dogs closely enough for signs of stress, anxiety, or overstimulation. This information should serve as a guide on how you and your dog can have a positive experience at the dog park!

First, Some Basic Guidelines:

Not all dogs are dog park dogs! If your dog has a history of aggression towards any other dogs or humans, becomes stressed in a group of dogs, or guards things that are of high value to him (toys, sticks), he may not be the best candidate for dog park socialization.

Keep it positive! If your dog is unfamiliar with the dog park setting, make sure his first few times at the dog park are positive and fun! This may mean going at off-peak times (Monday-Friday between 10am and 3pm or after 7:30pm on any day). Once you are sure that your dog can successfully handle the rigors of a dog park, you may want to introduce him at peak times.

Be present at the dog park. When you are at the park, always have your eyes on your dog! Watching for signs of stress or bullying, giving your dog time outs if they are becoming overstimulated, and knowing when to go home for the day all come from watching every move your dog makes at the park. Sure, you can still socialize with all of your new dog people friends, but remember to keep one eye on your pooch at all times!

Mind your comings and goings! Entering and exiting the dog park can be hot buttons for many dogs. Leashed dogs, when surrounded by loose dogs can feel threatened and vulnerable and may lash out. Practice proper entrance and exit techniques by utilizing our double-gate policy.

Know when your dog has had enough. You will notice through your dog's behavior and body language when it's time to go! If you see any signs that your dog is tired or has had enough for one day, be proactive and give your dog a time out by taking him for a walk outside the park, or go home for the day and come back the next day.

Be proactive! Everyone knows that their dog is pretty much the most wonderful dog in the whole park. But even if your dog is not the instigator, if you think that your dog is in danger of having a bad experience at the park, be proactive about the situation. Always talk to people respectfully, and know when it is better to simply remove your dog from the situation before an accident happens.

What's What at the Dog Park

When at the dog park, it is important to understand basic canine body language. This simple chart will help you recognize what is ok and what might lead to trouble.

Aggression vs. Correction:

There are times when a dog will correct another dog for something he deems inappropriate. This is totally normal, nonaggressive, and is actually good for teaching young dogs important lessons about canine social structure and body language. Appropriate corrections generally escalate in severity and result in no harm being done to the correctee. If your dog is over-correcting, it may be time to give a time out.

- Stiff body posturing and pilo-erection or whale eye. (Hair on shoulders and butt stand up and you see the whites of eyes)
- Loud woofs or snarks directed at an individual
- Muzzle punching or lunging resulting in no harm being done to the correctee
- Normally done once and the argument is over

Dog Park Etiquette

When it's time to go!

An important part of being a member of the dog park is recognizing when it is time for your dog to end their dog park session for the day. If your dog is exhibiting any of the following behaviors, it may be time to leave the park and come back later:

- Stiff body posturing and pilo-erection (hair on shoulders and butt standing straight up)
- Repeated correcting of other dogs, sometimes over very benign instances
- Targeting, bullying, or stalking individual dogs
- Fearfulness which does not subside
- Prey drive

Breaking Up a Dog Fight:

Dog fights happen! It is important when in a dog park to keep your cool if a fight breaks out so as not to escalate the situation. Collect loose dogs who are not part of the fight to prevent mobbing.

- Start by making a loud noise such as clapping your hands or shouting "No!", or throwing water on the fighting dogs.
- Do not grab dogs by collars or necks/faces to avoid a redirected bite.
- One person should grab each dog from the hips, pinching the loose skin between their belly and legs, and pull out of the fight, wheelbarrow-style. (Remember: 1 person per dog)
- Remove fighting dogs from the park for the day.

Appropriate - You're Ok!

- Butt sniffing and loose tail and body language
- Wide, circular tail wagging
- Play bows
- Butt bumps
- Playful vocalization
- Brief, fair, and harmless disagreements or corrections

Calming Signals - Meant to Diffuse Tension, Recognize and React Appropriately.

- Averting eye contact
- Lip-licking, chewing
- Submissive urination
- Going belly up
- Tail between the legs

Inappropriate or Rude - Time for a Time Out or Maybe Time to Go!

- Hard stares and face-offs
- One dog chasing, pinning, targeting, or not letting up on another dog
- A group of dogs mobbing an individual dog



Properly trained, a man can be a dog's best friend.

Corey Ford

Avoiding Good Times Gone Wrong

Healthy Play

Dogs nip while they play, chase, slam each other with their shoulders and hips, lie on top of each other, mount each other, and “fence” with their teeth. It can look scary and confusing to human beings, but it is how dogs have fun.

The same behaviors, however, can be carried to the point of rudeness and bullying. The following questions can help dog owners sort good, healthy fun from abusive or bullying play:

- Do both dogs look happy most of the time?
- Are their tails, mouths, and movements loose and relaxed (having fun), or are they tight and stiff (not so fun)?
- Is one dog asking for space or trying to get away and the other dog is not allowing it? (See “Stress Signals” section)
- Is the play edgy, hard-hitting, or causing fear for any participants?
- Is there healthy give and take in the play? Over a few minutes, does the dog who was on top take a turn on the bottom, or does the chaser become the chased?
- Is the play fluid, moving from one activity to another, or are the dogs “stuck?”
- Are two or more dogs ganging up on another who looks stressed?
- Is it becoming so intense that “snarks” and “scuffles” are happening?

If the play is not balanced, comfortable, and clearly happy for all parties, the dogs' owners need to redirect the dogs' activities, settle the offending dogs down with a time out from play (preferably outside the off-leash area), take some dogs home, or, if the Small Dogs area is not in use, move like-minded playmates over there.

Mounting

Mounting is a form of dog play that can be especially volatile, even if the dogs are well matched in size and physical condition. Mounting is not necessarily about reproduction or dominance, but can be a request for attention, an invitation to play, or a way for an overexcited dog to discharge energy. The problem is that some dogs are intolerant of mounting, and so it can trigger fights. Because mounted dogs often react to an innocent dog standing in front of them rather than to the one on top, the behavior can pose risks for surrounding dogs.

If your dog tends to mount, teach an “off” cue and intervene. Better yet, learn to see the behavior coming and redirect your dog before another one is stressed by it.

Stress Signals

Depending on context, some perfectly mundane dog behaviors can also indicate stress. Some of these behaviors discharge energy that is building up, and some signal that “I’m not looking for trouble!” If you see combinations of the following in social situations, look for what may be stressing your dog. If the stressors do not shift and you cannot positively influence your dog’s experience, take your dog out of the park.

Avoiding Good Times Gone Wrong (cont.)

Signals that may indicate stress, discomfort, or an effort to avoid conflict include:

- Increased activity
- Marking territory
- Scratching
- Yawning
- Shaking off
- Sniffing the ground
- Looking directly away from a perceived threat
- Lip- or nose-licking
- Front paw lift
- Approaching slowly and in an arc
- Sitting or lying down
- Blinking
- Sneezing
- Slow, careful movements

Signals that request or demand greater distance from another dog include:

- Staring
- Growling
- Snarking
- Ears flat against head (uneasy) or erect and forward (confident)
- Tension in body and face
- Muscle ridges in face
- Stalking or very erect, up-on-toes stance
- Hair up on back (can also indicate excitement)
- Urination and ground scratching
- Tail up over back or straight
- Tail wagging only at tip
- A brief look-away or turn-away at a tense moment

Again, many of these behaviors have multiple meanings, and so the trick is to know your dog and read the whole dog in context. If Daisy has one paw raised and her ears back, and she glances away from a dog approaching her, then she's probably feeling uneasy. If she has one paw raised and her ears forward as you head to the cookie jar, then she's probably thinking, "You rock, Mom, and I'll do anything for a cookie!"

If you think Daisy is expressing discomfort at the dog park but then her body language loosens up and she goes back to playing freely, no problem—but if she keeps expressing stress or a need for space, it's probably time to go home.

Avoiding Good Times Gone Wrong (cont.)

Resource Guarding

Some dogs are very protective of objects they value. The resources a dog may guard can be food (including training treats), toys, their owners ("my hunter, my driver, my ball thrower," etc.), doorways, and more—even feces or holes! Early signs of resource guarding could include hovering in a particular space or over a toy, lip licking (indicating stress), flared whiskers, curling the lip, and freezing as another dog approaches.

If your dog appears to be resource guarding, remove the resource, if possible. If that is not possible or does not help, take him/her out of the park before they begin lunging at others or a fight erupts, and come back at a quieter time.

If someone else's dog is resource guarding, move your dog away from him, put away anything that seems to arouse the dog's guarding impulse, point out aggressive behavior to the other owner, or leave.

Snarks and Scuffles

Just as tempers flare on a playground or basketball court, so do they in a dog park. When a dog nips or bumps too hard, another dog may respond by saying, "Hey, you jerk! That hurt!" That is the meaning of a "snark," - a vocalization that sounds like a combined snarl and bark. A "scuffle," sounds like a fight but ends just as quickly as it started.

If your dog has just had a scuffle, a time out may be advisable. If there are repeated snarks or scuffles, then it may be time to head home for the day and consider whether that particular group of playmates is healthy for your dog.

Fights

If handlers are on the ball, they will preempt rude play or bullying before fights break out. What do you do, though, if a fight erupts?

One option is to do nothing. Very few dogs fight to the death, and no dog with a history of serious fighting should be at the dog park in the first place. Age appropriate children (14-17) who visit the dog park with an adult must be instructed ahead of time to walk calmly away from any fighting dogs, even their own. Do not run or scream, and do not get involved. Shrieking children can trigger tragic behavior from dogs.

Anyone interfering in a fight is at risk of being bitten. Highly aroused dogs do not always know what they are biting. If a person restrains one dog, the other dog might continue aggressing, provoking the restrained dog to bite the person holding him. Screaming or shouting can escalate tensions and bring more dogs into the fray.

If someone has been knocked down near the fight or the dogs are badly mismatched, it can be almost impossible to stand back. If you feel compelled to intervene in a serious fight, here are some options, listed in descending order of safety:

Avoiding Good Times Gone Wrong (cont.)

- Use water: a squirt water bottle or throw containers of water on the dogs.
- Startle the dogs with loud noise, such as a loud whistle, an air horn, or clanging metal.
- Throw coats or blankets over the dogs.
- Use Direct Stop, a citronella-based spray (for dogs).
- Owners can simultaneously lift the tail of each dog in the fight.
- Take the dog's back feet off the ground, or...
- Grab the rear legs and pull the dogs out of the fight.
- Release their legs the instant the fighting stops (to avoid getting bitten yourself) and keep the dogs separated.
- As soon as the fighting breaks, immediately lead the dogs away from one another and follow the instructions described in "After a Fight", below.

After a Fight

Put each of the dogs involved in the fight on leash, check them for injuries, and assess whether veterinary care is appropriate.

As after a car accident, calmly exchange relevant information with the other dog owner(s), especially if there is an injury.

Remove the dogs from the park, one at a time. Even dogs that did not join the fight are likely to be extremely aroused, and their owners are advised to call it a day also.

Individually or collectively, review and evaluate what went wrong: What could have been done to prevent the dogs' interaction from escalating to a fight? Why didn't people see the fight brewing and intervene earlier?



***Dog parks are not the place
to take your dog for socialization...
Dog parks are a place to take socialized dogs.***