

Unleashing Common Sense

Dog Park Etiquette & Safety

By Lauren Lewis



P-A-R-K. One simple word and Bowser's ears perk up. His tail goes into overdrive. He eagerly looks from you to his leash to the door and back to you. Now that the weather is warm, dog park fever has set in. It's time for you and your four-legged pal to hit the ground running. Keeping a few things in mind can ensure that a visit to the park is fun for everyone.

First-timers

Before letting your pooch run loose at a local off-leash locale it is important to familiarize yourself with the area as well as all of the park's rules and regulations. "[Rules] exist for everyone's safety and are generally posted on the park website as well as at the dog park," says Anne Ferraro, president of K-9 Companion Zone, a nonprofit group in Indianapolis, Indiana, that works with the city's parks and recreation department to develop off-leash areas.

It is also a good idea to make your first few visits at non-peak times, such as daytime hours during the week or late afternoons on the weekend, when the dog park isn't so busy. Remember that it might take a little while for your canine pal to adapt to the new environment. "They may initially be overwhelmed by the sheer number of other dogs with all seem to want to run up and greet them at the same time," Ferraro says. She advises people to let a new dog off his leash as soon as possible upon entering the off-leash area. "This is because a dog that is restrained may feel threatened when approached by so many other unrestrained dogs. This may cause them to act aggressively to defend themselves or their [guardian]."

Everyone should pay attention to his dog's behavior at the park, but first-timers should make an extra effort to observe their canine's interaction and play style with others. "One common myth: A wagging tail...it's not a reliable indicator that a dog is happy," says Carol Panter, president of Dogparks of Greater St. Louis (D.O.G.S.). She advises consulting a trainer or doing a little research on canine behavior before visiting the park.

Follow the Rules

Most off-leash areas require that canine visitors be up to date on their major vaccinations, such as rabies, distemper, parvo, and bordetella. Heartworm and flea preventatives are also good precautions. In addition, always pick up after your pet. According to Panter, one of the most common rule violations she sees is people failing to pick up and dispose of dog waste.

For safety reasons, children are often not allowed in off-leash environments. Panter points out that children can inadvertently do things—such as screaming, running, squealing, and waving arms—that incite dogs. They may be accustomed to their own dog's behavior and assume that "all" dogs are nice. And of course, as smaller, more fragile humans, children are at greater risk of being knocked down or injured.

Etiquette

A little consideration goes a long way at the dog park. If something isn't posted in the rules, that doesn't necessarily mean it's not relevant. For example, bringing in food or dog treats is not a good

idea. "Some dogs in the dog park may be food-aggressive and the presence of food or dog treats can create a bad situation," Panter says. "It's safer for you and your dog to enjoy snacks before or after a trip to the dog park."

At Ferraro's park, small treats are allowed. But, she points out, "You should not offer treats to other people's dogs without first asking the [person's] permission. Sometimes people have their pets on special diets for health reasons and offering them treats might interfere with this, even though you are just trying to be nice and make friends."

According to Angeline Siegel, a behaviorist with Humane Society Silicon Valley, some pre-season prep work might be in order. "If your dog hasn't spent much time with other dogs, joining a training class or smaller socialization course would be best," she says. "This way you have the opportunity to teach them good doggie etiquette and basic commands that will be helpful at the dog park."

Some other things to remember: Don't smoke in the park, cigarette butts can be harmful if ingested by a dog; don't bring a puppy under 4 months, immunizations aren't complete until that age; and get your pooch spayed or neutered before going to the off-leash area.

In Case of an Accident

Accidents happen. Sometimes it can be something as small as your dog injuring the pad of his foot by stepping on a sharp object—a common dog park occurrence according to Dr. Tom Day, author of *The Pet Lover's Guide to First Aid & Emergencies*. Other times, it might be aggressive play or even a dogfight that causes an injury.

Before using a dog park, find out if there is an emergency contact phone number and program it into your cell phone. Also be aware of where the nearest veterinarian's office is.

If another dog acts aggressively toward your dog, be polite. Make the other guardian aware of the situation, and if appropriate, ask him nicely to take his dog away from yours. "If the [guardian] is not compliant, you are well within your rights to say something more," Panter says. According to Ferraro, "it is better to risk offending someone than to just stand around and allow a serious dogfight to erupt where a pet may be bitten or seriously injured."

If the other dog does attack or bite your dog (or you), call 911. Be sure to get the name, address, telephone number, and insurance carrier of the other dog's guardian, as well as contact information for any witnesses. "If you don't have this information and the injuries are severe, you'll have no way of filing a suit; most dog parks are 'enter at your own risk,' and frequently state law holds the other dog's [guardian] legally responsible for [his dog's] actions," Panter says.

Medical attention may be necessary, depending on the severity of the injuries. Slight pressure applied to the wound with a cloth or towel can control bleeding, Day says. However, "if your dog attempts to bite or is in obvious pain, leave the wound alone and seek [the help of a vet]," he says. "On the way there make certain that your pet hears a calm, soothing voice from you for reassurance."

Lastly, it's important to inform the parks department or the entity that governs the dog park of the incident, Panter says. "If no one reports incidents, they won't be aware there's a need to step up patrols or more strictly enforce the dog park rules." ☺

Doggy Tales

Are You Ready for a Visit to the Dog Park?

"I've been alone ALL DAY. Now you're home and I want to DO something!" telegraphs the thump-thump-thumping tail. Your best friend's soulful expression, along with the warmth and fresh air of springtime, lures you on. "Okay. Let's go to the Dog Park," you announce to the now careening canine.

What better place than a dog park for exercising, socializing, and nurturing the human-canine bond? Theoretically, only well-mannered dogs under the control of savvy owners are welcome there. But dog parks are also a hangout for The Clueless and The Careless – both two-legged and four-legged. A visit there can be either a highly rewarding experience, or something very much the opposite, depending on how well you're prepared.

The Clueless and The Careless

One quiet morning my Golden Retriever and I strolled toward a remote portion of the park. Though owning several obedience titles, he was nonetheless tethered on a 6-foot lead. This was our first visit, and I wanted to first familiarize us with the surroundings and be assured he would obey my verbal commands. Suddenly, at a distance of about 75 yards we spotted a dog barreling our way as its owner trailed far behind. My dog's ears went up, his gaze focused, as the strange dog rapidly bore down. When fewer than 50 feet separated the two, the other dog's owner called out from afar, "Is your dog friendly?" I didn't respond, instead stepping in front of my dog and using my shins just in time to intercept the incoming canine projectile. Quite understandably, my dog barked and lunged at the intruder who, thankfully, retreated without further incident.

When the other owner finally reached conversation range I inquired, as politely as my seething temper permitted, "What would you have done from way back there if I had said no, my dog's not friendly at all?" That earned me a nose-out-of-joint scowl. He likely

thought to himself that it was my dog, after all, who'd made the lunge and bark when all his dog had wanted to do was say "Hi."

This pair personifies The Clueless, an inevitable presence and potential hazard at every dog park. How are they clueless? Let's start with Fido. To crash uncontrollably into another dog's space is a "fo-paw" in the extreme. It's the canine equivalent of a mugging, certainly not how well-mannered and properly socialized dogs introduce themselves. His owner's failure to recognize such blatant misbehavior as such is the even more significant issue. One day that poor pooch is going to learn manners the hard way, when it gets munched and mauled by another dog. And then, the possibility looms that what began as a dog that just wanted to be friendly, but not knowing how, ends up turning fearful or aggressive. And his owner will be clearly to blame.

Then there's The Careless. You won't have to stroll very far into the park to spot them either, ignoring their dogs while visiting with companions or chatting on cell phones. Most unfortunate incidents are directly attributable to owner inattention when trouble could have been averted. Anyone who's ever seen one can attest that a dog fight is far easier to prevent than to break up. The Careless, too, have perfected the deception of nonchalantly bending to tie their shoe and pretending not to notice as their dog makes a "deposit." They're also famous for throwing the Frisbee or tennis ball for their dogs in heavily trafficked areas, well aware there are a dozen dogs nearby all eager to pounce.

Pack Leader = Trainer, Manager, Protector

You'll be well on your way to a pleasant experience at the dog park if you heed your responsibility to be your dog's trainer, manager



and protector. Train your dog before you go. Manage your dog while you're there. Be the pack leader he deserves by protecting him from perceived threats. And remember:

▣ Every dog that enters the park should be manageable on a lead. You teach this at home, not in the excitement of entering the park.

▣ If a dog is not reliably responsive to "Come" it should not be permitted off-lead, period. There is no shame in your dog spending the entire visit on a long line or retractable leash. He'll still be able to exercise and socialize, but you and other owners will all enjoy greater peace of mind.

▣ Don't permit yourself to become distracted. Watch "where your dog's nose is" at all times. This is neither the place to start a new book, nor to simultaneously attempt exercising and supervising a vanload of kids.

▣ Don't permit your dog to approach other dogs or people in boisterous fashion. Being called back to your side will quickly teach her that she gets to visit only when calm. Ask permission before approaching others, and be understanding if another owner declines.

▣ Don't permit out-of-control dogs to approach yours. Don't be shy about asking someone to keep their dog at a distance. This is your responsibility as pack leader.

▣ Don't force a shy or fearful dog into meeting and greeting. Let them go at their own pace.

▣ Welcome those who want to meet and pet your dog, but don't hesitate to show them how to approach properly as your dog sits politely.