

# Dog: Successful Dog Park Outings



Off-leash exploration and play are generally great ways to enrich your dog's life when done safely and responsibly. To ensure a good time for all involved, you will want to choose your locations wisely, learn to read your dog's body language, and, most importantly, supervise.

**Remember, dogs will not get along with every other dog they meet, just like we don't get along with all the different people we meet.**

Dogs who are likely to do best at dog parks are young, adolescent dogs (under two years of age) who enjoy playing and socializing with other dogs. For some dogs, however, this can be stressful.

As dogs mature, it is natural that they become more selective of their canine pals. They may become less tolerant of some other dogs or types of dogs. We, as dog guardians, need to notice and understand this. It is up to us to ensure we do not force our dogs into situations in which they are uncomfortable. We need to set them up for success and be proactive.

No matter where you and your dog are outdoors the following tips will help you both have a good time:

**Spay or neuter your dog.** Unaltered dogs are often more difficult to manage. Spaying or neutering can increase longevity, prevent unwanted puppies, and promote a healthier and happier relationship with your dog.

**Be a keen observer of your dog's body language.** If your dog shows signs of discomfort it is time to intervene. See handouts on dog body language and on fearful behavior in dogs.

**Socialize young dogs to other dogs early on in life.** It is a great way to exercise a dog, but bad experiences can shape your dog's attitude towards other dogs for a very long time, if not forever!

**Learn to recognize play.** Play is usually bouncy with short pauses, or it can be a wrestling match, or a game of chase.

**Size does matter.** Notice significant size difference between dogs. Large and small dogs can play well together, but always be cautious. Yelping or squeaking from the small dog can trigger a larger dog's dangerous predatory instinct. Larger dogs can also accidentally step on or run over smaller dogs.

**Watch for bullying behavior.** Jumping on top, pinning, and continual chasing and nipping are bullying behaviors. If another dog bullies your dog, leave the park or open space area. If your dog begins to bully other dogs you should leave the park as well. Bully-type dogs rehearse their behaviors at dog parks, so stay alert for signs from your own dog as well as other dogs.

**Know what to do when a dogfight occurs.** A high percentage of fights resolve themselves, but if you decide to intervene, here are some guidelines:

- Keep your hands away from the dogs' heads and mouths to avoid being bitten. Do not grab their collars because your hands will be too close to their teeth.

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- Try interrupting your dog's interaction by moving briskly away while you call your dog in a happy, light-hearted voice.
- Make noise, use water, insert something between the dogs, or cover their heads with something (a jacket, blanket, etc.) to distract them. See separate handout on dog fighting.

### **Remember the dog park essentials:**

- Pay close attention to your dog and be proactive! A common mistake guardians make is getting too involved in conversation with friends and neglecting to supervise their dogs. If you think your dog is overwhelmed or acting up, then take action to manage the situation.
- Don't just stand around! Keep moving around the park so your dog pays attention to where *you* are.
- Interrupt your dog's play from time to time by calling your dog to you and rewarding him. This helps keep play from tipping into canine arguments and also teaches that you are not only calling when you are leaving the park.
- Do not bring a sick or injured dog to the park, and be sure your dog is up-to-date on vaccinations.
- Unleash your dog before you enter the park. The leash can cause frustration that may make your dog act up, or it may cause other dogs to target your dog.
- Leave special toys at home if your dog does not like to share.
- Be careful if children are around. Not all dogs do well with kids, and many dogs can knock them over in excitement.
- **Pick up your dog's poop!**

**Alternatives: Beaches or hiking trails** are more often recommended for most dogs, because the open space allows dogs the opportunity to interact or keep moving to easily avoid other dogs, if that is what they desire. This is especially useful for dogs over 2 years old, herding breeds, and dogs that might be fearful of other dogs. Another benefit is that a dog's guardian is usually moving, which limits the length of interaction with any particular dog. With new sights and smells just around the corner, it is easier to distract a dog from potentially problematic situations.