

Is Your Dog a Dog Park Dog?

© 2004 4Paws University, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.
© San Diego Humane Society

As a trainer, I am frequently asked how I feel about dog parks. My answer is, "How does ***your dog*** feel about dog parks?"

Dog parks can be great places for your dog.

They can meet and play with other dogs, run off leash in large areas that are safe from traffic hazards. They can meet all kinds of other dogs of different colors, ages, sizes and even some people that give out treats!

Dog parks can also be dangerous places for your dog.

Most dog parks have rules posted requiring the dogs to be vaccinated and excluding "aggressive" dogs. That's great in theory. Have you ever had to show proof of your dog's vaccinations before entering a dog park? Not every dog owner is responsible maintaining their dog's vaccinations. Between, sharing kisses, water dishes and toys, dogs who frequent dog parks run the risk of being exposed to worms, giardia and other parasites and diseases.



Also, who decides which dogs are "aggressive"? If a dog is playing rough and very vocal, is he truly exhibiting signs of aggression or is that just his play style? Are you prepared to make the distinction? If your dog is on the receiving end of the rough treatment, does it matter to you?

Decide what is best for your dog.

At this point, you may be thinking that dog parks aren't such a great idea. So, I'll tell you that I regularly go to dog parks with my dog. I began because we lived in an apartment and she is a high energy dog who needs to run around a lot. I have continued, because it is a great place for us to work on training with distractions. Once she had solidly learned a basic behavior, we went to the dog park to work on it there. Not only was this great for her, it dramatically improved our bond.

However, to enjoy the advantages of a dog park, I had to make a few choices. Initially, part of why the dog park seemed so great was I could let my dog run around and burn some energy with other dogs, and I didn't have to do that much work. But I quickly realized that going to the dog park with my dog was not about me sitting on the picnic bench while she ran around. It was about me paying attention to, and spending time with, my dog. I needed to know where she was and what she was up to at all times. This is not only for purposes of poo patrol, but also because I wanted to know she wasn't starting any trouble and that no other dogs were starting any trouble with her.

If you do think your dog would do well in a dog park setting, here are some tips on how to ensure a pleasant experience:

The Threshold Area.

Most dog parks have a double gated area to take your dog off-leash before you are both actually in the park. First, take your dog off-leash in this area. **Do not walk into the park with your dog on leash.** When you walk into the park with your dog on-leash and all the other dogs are off-leash, you are potentially creating a number of problems.



First, you may be affecting your dog's body language. When a dog is pulling on leash, all their body is going forward and they are telling other dogs they are a challenge...even if they don't actually intend to be. Second, by keeping your dog on-leash when all the other dogs are off-leash, you are putting your dog at an enormous disadvantage. If your dog feels the need to get away from the onslaught of dogs, she has no way to. Being unable to get away, she may feel the need to defend herself.

The Rush.

Without fail, when you and your dog arrive at the dog park, many other dogs will rush the gate to greet you. How friendly of them, right?! The problem here is that dogs in dog parks form loose packs and they will want to quickly assess where your dog fits in that pack. This may lead to some conflicts, particularly if you have a fairly dominant dog. Also, the sheer number of dogs at the gate may overwhelm your dog, and again, he may feel the need to defend himself.

One way to avoid this is to just wait it out. If you stay in the gated area until all or most of the dogs have gone back to running around, you can avoid a lot of potential problems. This may mean you have to wait for quite a while, but it will make the dog park experience much more pleasant for your dog, so it is worth it. Also, if your dog is one of those gathering at the gate as new dogs arrive, either call him off or go get her. Let the new dog have a chance to get in the park and avoid any canine miscommunication.

What Is Your Dog Saying?

Pay attention to your dog at the dog park. Be ready to accept that your dog may not be an appropriate dog to be in the dog park. Or, that they may not enjoy the company of other dogs or *that many* other dogs. Dog parks are great fun for **some** dogs but they can be a nightmare for others.

Is Your Dog Being a Bully?

You might think, "My dog just plays rough like that." Look at the dogs your dog is playing with, if they aren't enjoying it, your dog is being a bully. Dogs are masters at communicating their discomfort and fear. A dog who behaves appropriately will respect that another dog is uncomfortable and either leave the dog alone, or ease up. If your dog does not do this, then your dog is being a bully. Respond appropriately by either removing your dog from the park or at least make him back off of the dog he is bullying.

Is Your Dog Afraid of Other Dogs?

If the dog park is too overwhelming for your dog, they are going to communicate that to you with their body language. So pay attention! Is her tail tucked and ears back? Does he feel like he has to defend himself from the other dogs? If so, maybe the dog park isn't a happy place for your dog. Maybe your dog would rather go on a walk or run with you, or play a rousing game of fetch, or learn agility. Ultimately, the choice about dog parks is up to you. But, as with every aspect of having a pet, if you choose to go to dog parks, do so with your eyes open.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.