

Depending on whom you ask, dog parks are the highlight of your dog's day, or the ideal setting for trauma, injury and lawsuits.

Exercise and socialization are have-to-haves for well-balanced, well-behaved and happy dogs. Where better to get this kind of experience for your dog than a dog park? Sounds like a no-brainer, but we hear all the time from clients that they're nervous about going to a dog park. They've heard the stories about dogs getting hurt and owners being oblivious. They're not confident that they can distinguish between what's appropriate play and what's a fight waiting to happen. And the idea of confronting other owners about their dog's unacceptable behavior is not something they wish to add to their to-do lists.

The bottom line: it takes a village. The success of any dog park depends on the willingness of owners to adopt and support basic rules of etiquette. If you're at Chuck E. Cheese's – the human equivalent to a dog park – and an overly sugared 4-year-old is shoving, shouting, and basically annoying your kid, most likely it's a natural reflex for you to step in and re-direct the exuberant child onto something else. Especially if there were the danger that your kid could snap and bite and start a brawl that would attract 20 kids of all ages and stages. The same rules apply at the dog park.

From the moment you pull into the parking lot at the dog park, your job as dog owner begins and your responsibilities extend beyond just picking up your dog's poop.

Owners often innocently believe that the dog park is a place for them to take their dog and let them run wild. It's a widely held belief, unfortunately, that the dogs will figure out the whole social thing themselves. While this would be fine for a pack of dogs in the wild, it's an irresponsible approach for our pet dogs. Not only is it dangerous, it undermines all the work you are (hopefully) doing at home with your dog to establish trust and respect. If your dog doesn't trust that you'll protect him, he's likely to act out in ways that can provoke a host of undesirable behaviors from other dogs.

Here are a few tips to help you and your dog get the most out of the dog park:

---**Keep moving.** Owners who stand around the perimeter of the park, engrossed in conversation or reading a book, are essentially saying to their dog "Good luck! You're on your own!" Dogs will often set up invisible perimeters around stationary people (even those who are not their owners) and then send off signals that they're "defending" this territory, basically challenging other dogs. Fearful dogs will hide behind people, broadcasting "I'm unsure and nervous!" which can provoke a more dominant dog to "correct," or can incite a prey drive. By walking around, you are interacting with the dog pack, and you're in a position to identify potential problems, and to step in and re-direct.

---**Keep watch.** Keep your dog in sight at all times, and be on the lookout for behavior or body language that indicates something's about to go down. For example, a new dog enters the park and is rushed by the pack for a sniff and greet. New dog stiffens up, indicating he's uncomfortable or frightened. This body language can be a prelude to a snap, which is likely to start a brawl in a pack of already-excited dogs. Your job is to be the diversion:

clap your hands, blow a whistle, do something to break the tension and distract the dogs. Even if your dog isn't at the center of it all, you're doing everyone a service by helping the dogs move onto something else.

---**Poop patrol:** Clean up after your dog both inside and outside the park. Create your own "poop karma": one of these days you won't see your dog poop and someone will pick it up for you. Do the same!

---**Be realistic:** If your dog is unruly, obnoxious, fearful, reactive, or behaves in any way that could incite trouble or make him a target, the dog park is not the place to work on behavior modification. Work with professionals in a controlled environment.