



Dog Park 101

Create a positive experience for
both you and your dog!

Rules of engagement

- Poop karma
 - Leave a pile, take a pile.
 - Give friendly reminders to each other.
- No food (human or dog) - can create conflict.
- No small children
 - Lots of dogs are not socialized to children; to them a child is not just a “small human” but a different animal entirely. Can be extremely dangerous, especially when children’s faces are at dog’s eye level.
 - Children can get knocked over and severely injured by playing dogs.
 - Dogs that are socialized to children may become over-protective of them around a bunch of strange dogs.
- Clothing - shoes you can run in so you can move quickly if necessary.
- Current dog license - it's the law
 - Keep a copy of your dog's license in the car to show proof of rabies vaccinations should he be involved in a fight that results in injury.
- Healthy dogs only
 - If your dog has been sick, don't visit the park until he has been symptom-free for at least 7 days (or whatever your vet says).
 - Ask your vet what vaccines your dog should have for visiting the dog park (e.g. Bordatella)
- Collars – remove harnesses and training collars (prong, chain).

Not for every dog

- Unspayed females in heat or unneutered male dogs.
 - Intact dogs might not instigate, but can bring out undesirable responses from other dogs (e.g. territorial behavior), which can lead to conflict.
 - Unneutered male dogs, regardless of age, often mount other dogs. This can lead to conflict in a split second.
- Unsocialized dogs
 - Extremely fearful – if your dog is miserable and hides under a chair the entire time you're at the park, work with a professional who can teach you how to gradually expose your dog to social situations.
 - Human- or dog-reactive
 - Dogs whose socialization skills are unknown. Meet with a professional before you take your newly adopted dog to a dog park.
- The very young or very old
 - Younger than 3 months (or dog not fully vaccinated)
 - Too old to be safe. Poor vision, orthopedic issues can prevent a senior dog from being able to avoid situations in which he could get hurt. Pain and physical changes in the brain of aging dogs can affect behavior; they can become less tolerant.

Before You Go In

- Park away from entrance
- Create focus on YOU:
 - Have your dog “wait” to get out of the car
- An overly excited dog is a natural target for other dogs.
 - Take a few minutes to leash walk your dog away from immediate park area (i.e. around the parking lot, up and down the street).
 - Overly aroused dogs often aren’t reading body language or making “good choices” and can cause or be the target of conflict.
 - Happy, not hyper. A hyper dog is not a happy dog.
- See who’s already at the party
 - What’s the vibe? If it’s a fraternity party and your dog is more of a cocktail party type, take a walk.
 - Take note of particular dogs’ behavior so you can avoid that dog if you see something you don’t like.

Your Job in the Park

- It takes a village. If everyone adopts this thinking, we can avoid being defensive.
- Keep gate clear when someone is trying to come in even if it's not your dog that's crowding it.
- Walk around, keep moving, keep an eye out. Not the place to make phone calls or read a book. Standing still may turn you into a "resource" that a dog feels he must "guard". If your physical mobility is an issue and you must sit, try not to crowd up with a bunch of other people. Change locations if your dog or someone else's dog is "hiding" under your chair, or posturing defensively in front of you.
- Walking around encourages your dog to keep track of you. When he checks in, affectionately reward him then let him go play again. (If the only time you check in with your dog is when it's time to leave, he'll start avoiding you.)
- Carry your leash.
- Park empty? Good time to practice recall, do some obedience drills.

Know Your Dog

- **Only you can decide if the current park energy is good for your dog.**
- **Individualist** – this is a dog who is happy to do his own thing. He might spend his entire visit reading and delivering pee-mail. As long as no one bugs him, he's fine. If the park is rockin', this guy might not want to come knockin'.
- **Wallflower** – not quite sure, these dogs spend a lot of time watching from the perimeter, keeping an eye out for that super polite and not overbearing playmate. Don't think your Wallflower gets nothing out of the park just because she doesn't actively play with other dogs. If a Party Animal keeps trying to initiate play, and you can tell it's making your dog uncomfortable, go interrupt and walk with your dog in another direction, or simply leave. Wallflowers might want to visit the park at non-peak times.
- **Party Animal** – these dogs often have to be interrupted before they adrenalize. They are frequently characterized as "don't know when to quit" and often aren't bothering (or don't know how) to read other dogs' body language or signals. They can be well-intentioned, but can be considered downright rude in the doggie social circle. If you have a Party Animal, you may need to leash him periodically to calm down. You'll also want to watch that other dogs aren't starting to get hostile. A lot of our fun-loving bully breeds are Party Animals.
- **Fun Police** – these guys (often the herding breeds or terrier types) see their role as "managers". Whenever things get wild, Fun Police will want to interrupt. While this is normal dog behavior, it can cause conflict among dogs that don't know each other. Fun Police can become targets. You'll need to practice interrupting and redirecting if you have one of these.
- **Ball Hog** – these dogs don't care about anything except their ball. Throw, chase, retrieve. Throw, chase, retrieve. And if a Party Animal or Fun Police tries to intervene, watch out! A Ball Hog should probably leave his ball at home.

Polite Greetings

- Polite dogs will generally greet each other in the following manner:
 - Dogs approach each other on a curve, not head on, or if one dog is approaching directly, he or she is looking away.
 - Dogs sniff butts.
 - Dogs reverse positions to sniff, lick, and muzzle faces.
 - Dogs either then go their own way or one or both begin to give play signals such as bowing, jumping side to side, darting in and out, and whining. Greeting is over or play ensues.
 - Unsocialized, nervous dogs may often try to avoid the greeting ritual, especially the sniff, and may not be ready for the dog park.

Impolite Greetings

- Direct and fast charge
- Holding eye contact
- Mounting
- Demand barking
 - Dogs that bark incessantly, whether at other dogs or humans, may not be ready for the dog park. This behavior can elicit a “correction” from another dog, which can ultimately lead to conflict.

Body Language

- Must be taken in context and looked at as part of a total picture. Can't rely on just one body part to tell the whole story.
- Understand that dogs want to avoid conflict – growling, snarling, snapping, raised hackles, generally to avoid a fight, not start one.
 - Dogs are hard-wired to understand the benefits of sustainable, not adversarial, relationships with other dogs (i.e. it doesn't make sense to hurt someone you need to hunt with tomorrow).
- Hackles (piloerection) – Fear, excitement, interest, aggression, nervousness, insecurity, startled or aroused feelings can cause a dog's hair to bristle. Look at total body language.
- Play bow – dramatic bum in the air, head toward the ground, tail wagging, body loose. (A still bow can be a calming signal.)

Body Language

- Tail – can't rely only on tail position to know what's going on with a dog. Must also look at ears, muscle tension, mouth, etc. Generally speaking, a high tail can mean excitement, which can be OK or not OK. A high fast-wagging tail can mean increasing arousal, which can lead to conflict. Know your dog.
 - One tail position that universally means “I'm scared” is a tail that is tucked.
- Teeth – teeth can be bared during play, although can be an indicator that some dogs may be right on the cusp of being too adrenalized for dog park play.
- Growling – depends on the context. Some dogs are very growly during play (e.g. Shepherds). But a dog is standing over the water bowl, frozen, ears back, teeth bared, and growling, it's obvious the dog is claiming the water bowl. Clap hands, make a noise to interrupt, call dog.

Body Language

- Ears – pinned-back ears can mean fear. Upright ears are alert or attentive. Dogs with drop ears, like Beagles, don't have a lot of different or visible ear positions.
- Eyes – dilated pupils indicate high adrenaline and excitement. “Whale eyes” (see the whites) is usually a dog that is afraid.
 - Staring is an adrenaline-loading activity. Interrupt it.
- Stillness or Freeze – can be the moment before a dog snaps, or can indicate extreme fear, or it can be a calming signal.

Calming Signals

Calming signals – signals used to prevent things from happening, avoiding threats from people and dogs, calming down nervousness, fear, noise and unpleasant things. Dogs use these signals to calm themselves and those around them. To indicate good will. People can use these signals with dogs—can be useful when you meet new dogs at the dog park.

- Dog coming toward you or dog in a curve vs. straight on
- Head turn – can be slight or obvious, quick or held
- Walking or moving slowly – slow movements are meant to calm.
- Bowing (play bow) – dogs will often do this and be still, holding the bow, and even combine with other calming signals to initiate “socially acceptable” play.
- Sitting or lying down – a dog that promptly sits down when another dog or person approaches is signaling.
- Yawning – calming signal; look at in context.

Calming Signals

- Sniffing – can be a swift movement down towards the ground and up again. Or a dog may sniff around persistently until the “problem” situation is over. Again, look at in context.
- Splitting up – dogs will often get between other dogs or people to diffuse a situation. You too can do this at the dog park.
- Softening the eyes – a slight squint vs. a hard stare says “I come with good intentions”
- Turn away – when a dog turns his shoulders and/or back toward a dog (or person). You’ll see dogs do this during wild play to calm things down a bit. Or a dog might do this if another is coming up to him too quickly or head on.
- Licking the nose – tongue flicking; happens quickly.
- Freezing – a dog may stop, stand, sit or lie still when another dog approaches if he is nervous. You’ll see small dogs do this often. Movement is “prey” to a dog, so freezing helps keep prey drive at bay.

Body Language



Piloerection



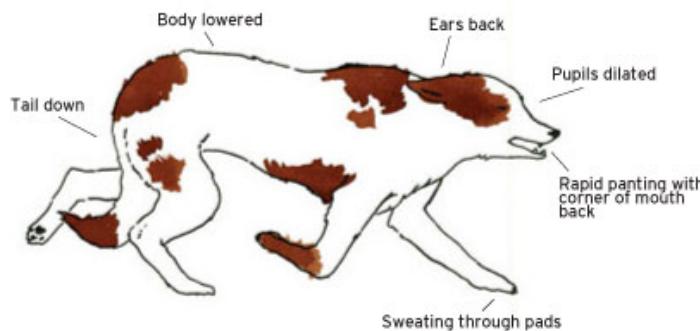
The “Look away”



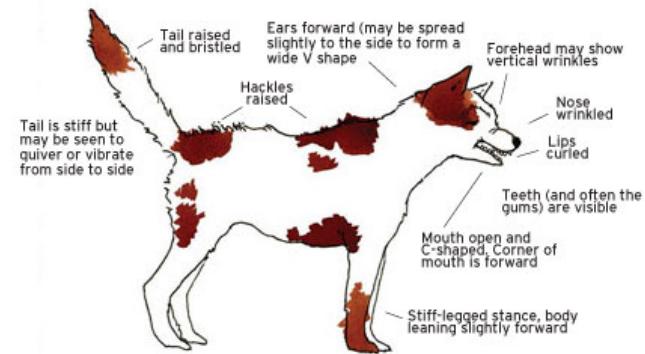
Play bow



Snarly fun



Stressed



Aggressing

Recommended reading: The Language of Dogs by Sarah Kalnajs

Play or a Problem?

- Dogs practice natural behaviors in play (predatory, sexual, hunting) but the play bow sets the tone.
- Chase
 - As long as chasee doesn't look nervous (tail tucked, ears back, whale eyes), and turns are being taken.
 - If multiple dogs start to join in, you'll want to interrupt. Chasing can increase arousal which can flip on the "predatory" switch in dogs.
- Toys
 - Recommend not bringing your dog's favorite toy to an environment that dogs think is neutral (i.e. where everyone shares).
 - If your dog is protective of his toy and will defend it, don't bring it.
- Taking turns
 - Dogs playing politely will take turns jumping on one another
- Three's a crowd
 - Often a "fun police" will try to get involved or two dogs can gang up on another. Should be interrupted.
- Freezes during play – play play freeze, play play freeze – social communication that says "we're still playing"
- "Socially awkward" dog – barking, mounting, rough, doesn't know when to quit, back biting w/intensity. Not a good park candidate.
- A word about bully breeds (pits, boxers, bulldogs) and their play style. Can be rough, lots of mouth play, heavy eye contact, not a lot of freezes, not always ideal dog park candidates ☹ unless playing with other like dogs.
- Interrupt w/whistle or compressed air or squirt bottle

When Conflict Occurs

- Keep in mind that most “conflict” is conversation to avoid a fight.
- Accept the fact that there is some assumed risk when entering a dog park; stuff happens, and “fault” can’t always be determined.
- If you’re at the park, you are committing to stepping in if your dog is in a fight.
- Injury/fault, etc. is a civil issue; not enforced by the city. Most dog owners will accept financial responsibility if their dog was an instigator or was acting with intent. Think about how you’d like to handle this *before* it actually happens (and your choice-making becomes hampered by adrenaline).
- Don’t make it worse by yelling at or getting physical with dogs or owners.
 - Realize that most owners become angry because they are very frightened.
 - Yelling can be mistaken by dogs as excited barking, which can increase fight intensity.

Breaking up a fight

- Dogs not involved should be leashed and removed from the area to avoid a pack fight.
- Each owner should grab their dog's back legs, pull back and quickly move in a circle. Keep moving in a circular pattern until you're far enough away from the other dog to snap on a leash. This hold and movement prevents dog from going back in. Immediately remove dog from area.
- After the fight:
 - Exchange contact information with other owner(s) in the event of injury.
 - Don't flee the scene in a huff: unless your dog requires immediate medical attention, reduce any traumatic effects on your dog by making an effort to calm down and then calmly leave the park.
 - Take photographs of your dog's injuries if you will be pursuing financial reimbursement from other owner.

Health Issues

- Dogs that are general healthy and vaccinated have a low risk of contracting illness from a dog park.
- The Bordatalla vaccine (kennel cough) is a good idea
- Have your dog checked regularly for parasites (coccidia, giardia).