

Miss Behavior's Tips for Dog Park Etiquette

Not all dogs are good candidates for the dog park. There is a very different style of play that goes on at parks and not every dog can handle it. The dog park is not the place to socialize your reactive or extremely fearful dog, unless you plan to meet up at non-peak times. Puppies should be very closely supervised to make sure they don't learn how to be a bully and to make sure they don't GET bullied! Just a couple dog attacks or dog fights will stick with a puppy forever and effects them much more than it might affect an adult. This is a choice that should carefully be considered when bringing a puppy to the park. All dogs should be friendly and outgoing, without being overbearing or obnoxious.

Please see the following tips for some more specific tips of good dog and human etiquette at the dog park

Entering the Park

Approaching the Park

The dog park can be one of the most exciting or stimulating places your dog gets the opportunity to visit. The number of dogs in a dog park can range from 1 to as many as 30 or more. Hopefully (as stated above), if you are choosing to go to the dog park, your dog is well socialized and enjoys the presence of other dogs, people, and the freedom of an off-leash area. Because your dog enjoys these trips to the park, he is most likely going to be very excited and may show signs of this excitement from the moment you wake up on a Sunday morning, from the turn down Taylor Ave, from the sight of the other dogs in the park, or anywhere in between!

There are a few ways to teach your dog some self control in entering the park. Dogs do what works so if your dog starts pulling you all the way into the park, and you follow, guess what?? It works! So, your dog will continue to pull you every time he wants to get there. One of the best things you can do is arrive at the park a little early and spend some extra time working on teaching your dog some good manners in entering the park. Remember that this is one of the most exciting places for your dog, multiplied by the number of dogs in the park! That being said, the dog park will also probably be one of the hardest places for you to get to without your dog pulling – but it's also one of the best places to practice! Bring some yummy treats and you'll be able to reward your dog's self control.

Here are the rules...

Every time there is tension on the leash (your dog is pulling), either stop in place or (even better) turn around and walk back towards the parking lot or down Taylor Ave for a few steps (or until your dog glances back at you or stops pulling).

Basically, tension = RED LIGHT.

A nice loose leash or eye contact with your dog = GREEN LIGHT.

This may be much easier said than done. If your dog pulls on the leash in everyday walks, it would be worth practicing around fewer distractions. Throw in some treats for good behavior and to accelerate the process. Coming to the dog park at quieter times to practice will also help! Stay consistent with this or else your dog will keep testing you.

Gate Manners

One of the number one places for dog fights to start at a dog park is at the gate when a new dog is entering (or even when dogs are exiting). If you have a dog who is part of the “greeting party”, it would be worth teaching them to back away from the gate when a new dog is coming in. While I normally do NOT recommend giving dogs treats in the park (since it can cause fights), if you have a dog that shows tension at the gate, you can instead teach them that a new dog coming in means that they get a treat for backing away AND they get to greet the new dog.

Have your leash handy... If it's not, you can grab the collar but this can make things much more difficult. When a new dog is coming in, hook your dog on the leash, move AWAY from the gate and away from the other dogs. Treat/praise your dog for attention on you. When the new dog has come in and your dog's attention is still on you, unhook the leash, ask for a sit, then give an “OKAY” or “Go Say Hi” and release. If you are having trouble grabbing your dog's attention, add more distance from the gate and/or higher value rewards! If your dog isn't food motivated, just running backwards will often grab their attention.

The key thing here is that you don't release your dog when they are frustrated or trying to pull away from you. Another key thing is that you are NOT using treats near the other dogs. You are using the treats/praise to reward attention on you, with the ultimate reward being that they DO get to go say hi – just under your control!

Manners within the Park

Human Manners

Some basic but helpful rules...

Jumping dogs: If a dog jumps on you, turn your back! Do not pet or even push the dog off of you. One of the number one complaints from dog owners is that their dog jumps on new people. Along with that, it's always the “other people” that reward the jumping! Co-incidence?? Definitely not! It's not usually “cute” to the owners, and unlike the new people, the owners DO mind because they have to live and deal with the dog 24/7! Help them out by becoming aware of how you are rewarding the jumping. Something as seemingly insignificant as eye contact can be rewarding enough for a dog to learn to jump again, so try to get in the habit of turning your back.

Running dogs: Either sit down or bend your knees! Dogs run, they play, and they almost always do it NEAR the people. People act as a good barrier for them, especially in a big open area. There is a reason why they stay near people, so if you are afraid of being body slammed, please choose to sit down or at least stand near the fence. This is why young children are prohibited from the park. Running dogs can easily take down a 200lb man, never mind the 50lb children!

Dog Manners

Bullying Behaviors:

A common comment I hear at the dog park is: “Don’t worry. Just let them work it out”. In most cases, ok, it’s *kind of* true. However, when there are as many dogs as there usually are at the park, you don’t want them to HAVE to work it out. The biggest reason is because of the pack mentality. If a scuffle starts, most of the dogs will instinctually get involved and then we all know what can happen... More importantly overall, you want your dog to have a good experience. You don’t want him to HAVE to growl, nip, or bite another dog because he’s scared. If your dog is being bullied by another dog and is being overwhelmed by it, go ahead and step right in to give him a break. You can either remove your dog completely or step right in front of your dog and “have his back”... 30 seconds and then release again. Do this multiple times if necessary, so that your dog is being protected but also is learning to deal with the situation.

If, instead, you have a dog who is doing the bullying, you will also want to step in and give them a “time-out”. Removing them to the other side of the gate for 30 seconds is an idea, or doing the same as above and stepping right in front of him, to give the other dog a break. Bullying includes body-slamming, nipping at the ankles, cornering, consistent mounting (aka “hugging”). The biggest sign that your dog is being a bully is if the other dog does not seem to be enjoying it – tail tucked, hackles up, growling, showing teeth, trying to get away...

Appropriate dog play is give and take. Every breed plays differently so keep an eye on the other dogs and make sure they seem to be playing back. For example, Boxers tend to be a breed all of their own, literally “boxing” the other dogs. Labs play with their mouths and like to roll around on the ground. Bully breeds (Pit Bulls, American Bull Dogs, etc) are notorious for body slamming, so while it might be okay if they are playing with other Bully Breeds, a Lab mix might not handle it as well. Cattle dogs like to herd the other dogs and tend to go for the legs... If all else fails, give the other dog a break from your dog. If that dog comes back for more, there’s your answer... Be extra careful with puppies, your own or someone else’s. The type of behavior they have to “deal with” in a dog park setting will hugely affect their future play styles. Even if they seem to be having fun, sometimes they just don’t know any better!

Body Language:

Happy dog...

Tail at body level
Loose wiggly body
Helicopter circles in the wagging tail
Ears forward or neutral
Mouth open/panting



Nervous dog

Stiff body
Tail low/Wagging stiffly
Ears back
Low body posture
Slow movements
Hackles up
Avoiding eye contact
Yawning



(Dog facing the camera)

Status-Seeking Dog

Hackles up
Tail high
Stiff tail (can be wagging)
Head held high
Moving forward/Leaning forward
Puts head or paw over the back of another dog
Ears forward
Stiff body
Hard eye contact



(A lot of tension between both dogs. A fight could happen here if one of the dogs does not give in)

Exiting The Park

Calling “come”

One of the most common mistakes I see owners making at the dog park is calling their dog to “come” and then leaving! Think about this from your dog’s perspective. They are running around having fun but you need to get going. You call them to “come”, they listen and your grab them to leave. Can you blame them for not “coming” next time? Unless your dog loves car rides MUCH more than the park, you never want to call them to come, at the end. It would be a great idea to call them to “come” once in a while and then release them to go play again but it’s

not a good idea to call them before you leave, unless you have some really good treat/reward for them on the way out! This is usually what causes the “keep-away” game! The better idea is to just grab them when they are nearby as you are getting ready to leave. But the BEST idea is to have some special treats for them after exiting. BONUS!