



Dog Parks

by Jaymi Heimbuch

Dog parks. They're a play heaven for our furry friends, right? Well, not really. Dog parks are one of those places that seem like a brilliant idea — and would be, if we all knew how to behave. But we don't.

As many a trainer will tell you, you can potentially ruin your dog by taking her to dog parks. A single situation gone wrong can escalate into an attack or fight, which can cause life-long reactivity or fear aggression in your dog. I've even talked to people whose dogs have had serious injuries (and one lost a leg) because what seemed like play escalated into an attack — something that probably could have been avoided if everyone involved had been reading the body language of the dog and paying attention to some simple rules of behavior. The bummer reality is that dog parks are not the playground most people think they are. But they can be. Here are the most common things people do wrong (so you can avoid these mistakes), and five ways you can make dog parks a safe and fun environment for all involved.

1. Not picking up after a dog.

Let's start with something simple like sanitation. First, it's simply good manners to scoop up after your dog does her business. It's gross to walk into a park that has poo everywhere and worse, it's really bad for your dog. There are a lot of diseases and parasites living in dog waste that other dogs can contract when they touch, roll in, or eat it. Unpleasant on all counts. So let's avoid the spread of disease and follow this simple rule of etiquette. You also earn bonus points for bringing extra poop bags for other owners.

2. Not exercising a dog before taking her into a park.

This might sound counterintuitive. I mean, we go to dog parks to exercise our dogs, right? Wrong. Dog parks are a supplement to a dog's daily activity, not the sole source of exercise or socialization. A dog that has been inside or alone for hours has pent-up energy, and bringing her into an extremely stimulating environment such as a park with other dogs is like holding a match really close to a stick of dynamite and hoping the fuse doesn't catch fire. Your dog might mean well but be overly exuberant with a dog that doesn't appreciate it (resulting in a scuffle). Or, your dog might mean well but be

so excited about running around that other dogs start to chase her and she suddenly turns into the prey object for other dogs (resulting in a fight). See where I'm going with this?

3. Bringing dogs with rude greeting skills.

We've all experienced it: meeting a person who stands way too close when we don't even know them. Meeting someone who is really loud and tells obnoxious jokes within the first 30 seconds of an introduction. Meeting someone who shakes your hand for too long until it's kind of creepy and awkward. We glare at them, chalk them up to being rude, and count the seconds until we can escape.

It's like this for dogs too. Introductions are important and make a difference in how dogs will get along. Allowing your dog to go charging up to a dog that has just entered the park is rude. The new dog is possibly on edge, examining its environment and level of safety, so your dog running full speed to that new dog could be asking for an instant fight. Allowing your dog to mount another dog is also rude. Allowing your dog to continue sniffing another dog that is clearly uncomfortable with being sniffed is, again, rude. It's up to us humans to help dogs make polite introductions to each other. Knowing what's polite in the dog world and what isn't, and knowing how to help your dog be a polite pooch is essential to having positive experiences at a dog park.

4. Leaving prong/pinch/choke collars on dogs while playing.

Everyone knows how I feel about these types of collars, if I had the power I would banish them from the universe...but until that day happens, please remember, the neck and shoulders are where most dogs aim their nips and nibbles during play. Having metal contraptions where another dog is roughly shoving its mouth is inviting broken teeth, broken jaws, broken paws and legs, and potentially a huge dog fight if another panicked dog can't detach itself from your dog's neck. A simple nylon collar that can be quickly removed with one hand, is safe.

5. Keeping dogs on leashes inside an off-leash area

First, dogs on any sort of leash in an off-leash dog park is a bad idea. New owners often feel more secure keeping their dog on a leash, thinking that it'll be easier to control a dog whose quirks and reactions they haven't quite learned yet. However, a dog on leash is essentially a tripping hazard, especially if the leashed dog begins to play. A firm tug on a wrapped up lead could mean, if not a broken leg, a panicked dog whose first experience of a dog park is one of fear and anxiety. In addition, dogs on leash can feel more insecure because they know they can't escape if they need to, so they can actually trigger scuffles that might not otherwise have happened. Second, people who use retractable leashes in dog parks are really asking for it. If extended, other dogs running loose can run straight into that thin cord and get injured. Or the dog attached might decide to take off after another dog, thinking she has all the freedom in the world, until she hits the end of the cord and is snapped back by the neck.

6. Bringing a female in heat or pregnant female.

I don't think I need to go into detail on this one. It happens — even though it never, ever should. If you want to see all hell break loose among a group of dogs, then watch when a dog in heat is brought into the mix.

7. Bringing puppies with incomplete vaccinations.

There are so many diseases and parasites in a dog park to begin with — it just makes you shudder. Older puppies and adult dogs who have been immunized can mostly handle the grossness, and will maybe only pick up Giardia or worms which, as an adult with a strong immune system, they can easily survive with treatment. However for puppies that haven't completed their vaccinations, not only are they liable to pick up anything from parvo to distemper, they could pick up something like Giardia or worms that their tiny bodies have a hard time handling. Puppies under 12 weeks or that haven't been fully immunized against common diseases need to be kept well away from dog parks.

8. Small dogs in same play area as large dogs.

Some dog parks don't have separate play areas, and if that's the case where you are, be careful about bringing your small dog to such a park. Small dogs can often be viewed as prey by large dogs. The squeaking barks and speedy movements of a panicked small dog can also be enough to switch on the prey drive in a large dog and disaster happens. I've watched it happen on multiple occasions — it never ends well, and it sometimes ends with serious damage done to the small dog, and with the large dog being called "vicious" for simply being a normal dog that was overly stimulated. If you bring a small dog to a park where large dogs are playing, it's on you if something happens to that tiny pooch. Is it worth the risk? Probably not.

9. Picking up and carrying a small dog.

This brings us to another common mistake owners of small dogs make. It is extremely understandable to want to pick up your small dog if a situation starts to escalate. It's so innate in us, it's nearly impossible to fight that instinct. We pick stuff up to protect it. But from a dog's point of view, when things go upwards quickly it's because that thing is fleeing, which means "chase!" The act of small dogs being lifted up triggers a treeing instinct in many dogs, moving them right into prey drive and exciting them into jumping on you to get at the small dog. In a dog park, where all dogs are extra stimulated and excited, picking up a small, panicked dog could be enough to get you knocked over or possibly even bitten.

10. Bringing in a dog that lacks recall skills.

Recall is about more than having your dog come when called. It's also about having a dog that is constantly attuned to you and ready to obey no matter what, even in the midst of a game of chase. Recall is about being able to disengage your dog from an activity that is escalating and having her return to you until tempers calm down. Recall skills are important not just for your dog's safety, but for the safety of every dog she is interacting with. No recall skills, no dog park.

11. Allowing dogs to bully other dogs.

You might think it's cute when your dog is bouncing all over another dog, but it's not. Learn when play gestures are cute and engaging — and socially appropriate to dogs — and when they're just flat out obnoxious and rude. A play bow from a little distance away is cute. A tag-and-run request for play is cute. But constantly nipping at another dog's neck and pouncing him to try to get a game of wrestle going is obnoxious. Especially when the dog on the receiving end isn't comfortable with it. If your dog is getting too rough or rude with a dog that is not liking it, it's time to call your dog over and have her leave that dog alone.

12. Letting the dogs 'work it out.'

Yeah, that just doesn't work. So many people at dog parks think that if they leave the dogs alone, they'll get through whatever social drama is happening. Dogs can be good at working things out, but dogs meeting for the first time in a stimulating environment are not on the best path to being able to work out differences. If a dog is being picked on, or there are signs of dislike between two dogs, it's up to the humans to intervene and keep everyone mellow and happy. A perfect example of this is when a dog tries to mount another dog over and over, especially upon first greeting, and it is passed off as "they're figuring out the chain of command." Nope, that dog is just being plain old rude — by both human and dog standards. If your dog needs to mount other dogs to figure out where he sits on the totem pole, then dog parks are not the best place for your dog and some training is in order. If there's another dog at the park doing this to your dog, separate the dogs and leave the park. Being around a dog like that is not worth the potential trouble. Being around owners who think dogs should be left alone to "work it out" is also not worth it.

13. Bringing dogs that have resource-guarding problems.

Dogs who don't like to share toys, or who like to steal toys and hoard them, are not going to have fun in a dog park. Not only that, but that kind of dog is also a potential danger to other dogs that want to play with toys and don't take her cues to back off. This goes beyond toys, too. Dog treats are common in dog parks and a resource-guarding dog who picks up the scent will guard that food resource against other dogs with varying levels of aggressiveness (even if the treats are still in the human's pocket!) Some dogs take resource guarding to a new level by guarding the dog they're playing with, or even their own human. If your dog has any issues with resource guarding, the dog park is not a safe place to play.

14. Chatting with other humans rather than supervising the dogs.

A person's number one priority at a dog park is a dog, not conversation with other humans. Think of it like taking children to a playground, putting them on the jungle gym with other kids, and then turning your back on them to chat with other parents. That's frowned upon, right? You have no idea if arguing is breaking out, if someone is throwing sand, or if a kid is about to take a 10-foot plunge from the monkey bars. Same with dogs. Too many people feel they can let loose their dog in a fenced park and then just have a nice chat with other dog owners. But if you're busy chatting, you're not watching. Dog parks are for dogs; coffee shops are for chit chat.

15. Spending more time looking at a smartphone screen than at the dogs.

In the same way that chatting with other humans should not take priority over supervising dogs, a smartphone should not become a distraction either. Sadly, I've seen people enter the dog park and stare at their phones the whole time while their dog is wreaking havoc in the park or, even sadder, the dog just stands there staring at the cellphone-absorbed human, wondering if they're ever going to play. Dogs know when you're mentally disengaged and they can often take advantage of that — breaking rules because they know they can. Don't make other dog owners have to manage your dog for you because you're texting or tweeting or posting a picture of your cute dog to Instagram. Think of it like texting and driving: it can wait.

16. Not supervising kids.

First, seriously think about if you really ought to bring kids. For so many reasons, it's a bad idea. Squeals and quick movements of kids can switch on a dog's prey drive. Kids can grab strange dogs' ears, tails or pet them in ways the dog doesn't like, which readily invites a bite. Unless your small

child is well-versed in how to act around dogs — including leaving them alone, standing still around running dogs, and dropping to the ground and covering their necks if a dog attacks — then they don't belong in a dog park. Second, if you do bring kids with you, they need to be supervised as closely as the dogs. Running, throwing things and touching strange dogs should be minimized. It only takes one overly excited dog to make things unpleasant really quickly. That said, with enough supervision and in the right atmosphere, dog parks can be a great learning opportunity for older children to be taught dog body language and appropriate behavior around animals.

17. Putting strollers, lawn chairs, and other items in the middle of the fields.

Dogs don't watch where they're going a lot of the time. Consider a dog in a game of chase, running full blast while looking behind to see where her chaser is, only to careen into a stroller, lawn chair, backpack or whatever. Major ouch. It's scary and painful for the dog, and probably damaging to the property. Oh, and it will probably also get peed on in about 10 seconds. The only thing that should be set out in a dog park is the dog.

18. Bringing in human food.

If you want to go to a dog park and see a bunch of dogs sitting and standing around staring at a human, by all means, bring human food. Or, if you want your lunch stolen by a slobbery thief, bring it to a dog park. Besides being a total distraction for the dogs (and also a rather unsanitary place to eat) human food can also be bad for a dog that does manage to steal it or pick up the crumbs. From onions to chocolate to grapes, what you bring to the dog park could be toxic to the pooch that hoovers it up.

19. Feeding someone else's dog.

Big, big no-no. The dog owners who bring a baggie of biscuits to share certainly mean well, but feeding someone else's dog without permission is rude behavior. I've come across dogs that have allergies to certain ingredients, are on an elimination diet for medical reasons, are simply on a diet because they're tubby, are bad beggars whose owners don't want the behavior encouraged, are on certain medications so have very specific diets. Owners of these dogs really don't want others feeding their dog something strange that could throw their system out of whack. Though you truly are a sweetheart, don't feed another person's dog without asking permission. Just as you wouldn't give food to a strange child in a playground, don't give food to a strange dog at a dog park.

20. Bringing dog-aggressive dogs to the dog park to socialize them.

Dog parks are often viewed as a place where dogs socialize. It makes sense, right? It's like a big old doggie cafe! Well, only within reason. For dogs who are already practiced at socialization, yes, a dog park is a place to meet and greet. But for dogs that need socialization, the dog park is not the place to do it. Especially with dog-aggressive or dog-reactive dogs. For dogs that have issues with other dogs, they need a calm, quiet, and controlled atmosphere to meet and learn proper interactions with neutral dogs. This is not the atmosphere at dog parks, where everyone is running, playing, overly stimulated and on edge. In fact, an owner can make her dog's aggression far worse by putting the animal in the middle of such an environment. Not a good mix for that dog, nor for every other dog forced to interact with her.

21. Bringing fearful dogs to the dog park to socialize them.

Again, like dog-aggressive dogs, fearful dogs need calm, quiet, controlled environments with low stimulation levels to learn how to get over their fears. Fearful dogs could be afraid of too much noise, other dogs, sudden movements, other humans, trash cans or any number of things. If you have a dog that tends to be easily scared or nervous, a dog park is a nightmare. Think of it like this: if you were really afraid of spiders, what if someone dumped a bucket of spiders on your head and said, "See! It doesn't hurt!" It may not hurt, but it would completely freak you out! Same thing with bringing a dog that is scared or insecure to a place with too many new stimuli. It could lead them to become even more afraid, or worse, start lashing out to protect themselves from what scares them so much. To socialize a fearful dog, work with a trainer or take small-group classes.

22. Giving out training advice.

Everyone is an expert, right? Well, not so much. But people at dog parks can sometimes think that because they have a dog, they're an expert. Again, they totally mean well and their heart is in the right place, even if their opinions are wrong. But let's face it, it's a bit obnoxious and could be potentially dangerous. Think of dog training like tattooing. Sure, anyone can do it, but the results, which are usually permanent, will depend on education and experience. With dog training, the technique and approach can make all the difference in how a dog responds and whether or not they improve or get worse — or, as can sometimes happen with bad training advice, get worse and have other problems pop up as a result. So, unless you're a professional trainer, it's a good idea to not hand out advice at the dog park. On the flip side, take any training advice you're given with a grain of salt and verify it with a professional trainer before trying it out.

23. Letting a dog walker take your dog to a dog park without spying on them to make sure they know what they're doing.

Yes, you should totally spy on your dog walker in this instance. You will hear this advice from both dog trainers and responsible dog walkers. Not every dog walker knows what they're doing. Despite a lack of training or experience, some dog walkers feel it's a good idea to collect their pack of dogs from various homes and head to the park. They may or may not know the behavior quirks of each dog. They may or may not know the obedience level of each dog. And without a doubt, their ability to control each dog is limited. If your dog walker is taking your dog to a dog park, spy on them. Seriously. On the flip side, if a dog walker shows up with a group of dogs at the park where your dog is playing, it would be a wise idea to leave.

24. Blaming the breed for bad behavior.

This is something that goes well beyond dog parks, since many of us are guilty of blaming the breed rather than the individual dog for certain behaviors. We humans are amazingly good at stereotyping, and then taking those stereotypes at face value. This is to our detriment, even when it comes to dogs at dog parks. Just because your dog has certain breed characteristics, doesn't mean those characteristics can justify bad behavior. Let's look at some examples. Herding dogs herding other dogs: rude. Bulldog breeds playing really rough or not picking up the other dog's cue to stop: rude. Chihuahuas and terriers acting like a little general, barking at and chasing off any dog that comes near: so totally rude. Never say, "Oh it's because he's a _____ that he does that." Nope. It's because your dog is how he is, and you need to train him to act appropriately and with courtesy to other dogs. It might be in their breeding to act a certain way but that's no excuse to allow that to surface to the point that it causes problems for other dogs. It may be something you have to work with them on for their entire life, but if you're going to a dog park, polite behavior regardless of breed is a must.

25. Forcing your dog to play.

I've watched dogs who have no interest in playing, and are trying so hard to tell their owner that they just want to sit there or leave, be repeatedly encouraged to go play. I've even seen an owner literally pick up and toss her dog into the mix, trying to get it to play with other dogs. Your dog loves you, and you love her. And in a loving relationship, you listen to and respect with the partner has to say. If your dog is telling you she doesn't want to play — by continually going to the gate, sitting or standing by you just to watch the action but not participate, ignoring or warning off other dogs who try to initiate play — then listen to your pooch and leave. Forcing your dog to engage erodes the trust in your relationship, and turns the dog park into a place of dread rather than an interesting environment. This can spark behavior problems not only at the dog park but possibly in other areas as the trust and cooperation breaks down.

Do dog parks sound like a total nightmare yet?

Well they sure have that potential. But they don't have to be. In fact, you can be part of making a dog park a safe and fun place to be. Here's how:

5 ways to make your experience at dog parks so much more enjoyable.

Think about why you're going there in the first place: Really take a look at why you're going to the dog park. If it is to exercise or socialize your dog, then don't go. Dog parks should be a supplement to a dog's daily activity and socialization, not the primary source of it. Making a dog park the primary source is, as we've seen above, inviting trouble. I totally get it — some days we just feel lazy and we'd rather take our dog somewhere they can run and play with minimal effort on our part. I've been there. But dog parks aren't the solution because they actually require quite a bit of focus, effort and input from us to keep things safe. Likewise, look at how you're feeling about the dog park. If you're only going to do your own socializing, don't go. I can't stress this enough: your dog needs your attention and supervision while in a park. If you're going to compromise that, then think of another activity for you two to do together.

Exercise your dog's brain and body before arriving: This may seem counterintuitive, since so many of us think a dog park is where dogs should exercise. But I promise, this simple step will dramatically reduce the potential for problems. Before you head to a dog park, run your dog and get out all that pent-up zoomy energy that can be the source of so much doggy drama. Don't take a wired-up dog into a stimulating environment like a dog park. That's the physical exercise part, but you also need to mentally exercise your dog before you walk through that gate. Practice recall, lying down on command, leave it, drop it, stay, and other essential cues. Reward your dog with awesome treats to get them happy about listening to you. Your dog needs to respond to these commands in an instant, no matter what else is going on around her, in order to make sure you both stay safe in a dog park. Knowing that she'll get high value treats when she responds will help in getting her to pay attention to you more than the excitement around her. So exercise your dog's brain and body before entering a park.

Leave at the first sign of trouble: Okay, you've done everything right so far. You're at the dog park for the right reasons, you've exercised your dog to get the zoomies out, she's paying attention to you when you call to her, and things are looking great. But in comes someone who hasn't done things right with their dog. It doesn't matter if you just got there, or if you have to stop mid-throw during fetch. The second you see an overly excited dog coming in, or your dog is starting to get tense, or someone's dog isn't listening their owner or worse, not listening to other dogs' social cues, just go.

Get out of the situation before it becomes a situation. It's all fun and games until someone ends up in a cone.

Learn your dog's personality when it comes to group situations: What is your dog like in social situations? (And be honest. You're among friends here.) Are there personality types she clashes with? Does she tend to be an instigator, a moderator or the target? Is she fearful around certain types of dogs or in certain situations? Does she pay attention to social cues from other dogs even when she's excited? Does she tend to panic, or freeze, or lash out when things get tense? Know your dog's every quirk and know how to recognize both the signs that your dog is building up to a certain reaction as well as the triggers that cause it. Then know how to stop that reaction before your dog even gets there. It may end up that once you take a serious look at how your dog is in social situations, you'll discover that the dog park is not the place for her at all. And that's okay! Your dog is wonderful even if social play with strangers isn't a good activity for her.

Study up on dog body language: This is the most important thing you can do for your dog. Hands down. Learn what it looks like when dogs are being overwhelmed, nervous, unsure, overly excited. Study what the height of a tail and frequency of wag is signaling (indeed, tails are as important to dog communication as tongues and lips are to human communication) and how dogs' eyes convey messages, from relaxed to stimulated to angry. What does it look like when a dog is asking to play versus being a bully. Learn the signs for when excitement switches to aggression. Learn what your dog is telling you and other dogs by the slightest twitch of the ear, pause of the body, or dilation of the pupils. (Yes, dilation of the pupil. Seriously, that tells you a lot.) Learn what proper and rude dog behavior is according to dogs, so you can determine which dogs in the park may become a problem, or if your dog is actually the problem. When you've studied dog body language, you'll be able to look at a dog park in a whole new light and in an instant, assess the mood of the group of dogs present and thus the safety level. You'll be able to see and stop problems before they escalate. And most importantly, your bond with your dog will grow and strengthen as you better understand what she's telling you in her own canine way.

