

Dog Park Etiquette

Written by Beth Logan, CDA volunteer and trainer

Dog parks can provide exercise and socialization for dogs, but they can also provide problems if dog owners are not paying attention. This is no different from a playground for children. A group of children playing can turn into shoving and crying if children aren't taught how to behave and parents don't watch for signs of trouble. And all parents need to clean up after their children to keep the playground safe.

We all want the dog park to be the fun time for our dogs. A little understanding of dog behavior and an alert eye is all it takes for good dog interaction. A little personal responsibility for the park is all it takes for the park to stay nice and clean.

The first step is to only bring dogs to the park that are relaxed around strange dogs. I have two wonderful dogs. One of them loves other dogs. The other has been bitten in the past and is nervous. He shows his nervousness by barking and growling. Some may say this is aggressive, but listening to his growl, you will hear a whine. That whine is the sign that he is scared and unsure of the other dog. I do not bring him to places where strange dogs play. He has a few dog friends that visit and I don't push him to meet more.

My friendly dog can be overly friendly but I have taught her to approach other dogs slowly. She will roll over if the other dog shows any sign of concern. This is a good trait for a dog because rolling over is like saying "I am not a threat and just want to be friends."

My neighbor has a dog that lunges and pulls on the leash when he sees other dogs, cars, bicycles, etc. This lunging is a sign of aggression. It could be from nervousness or a more malicious. Either way, like my nervous dog, he should not visit a dog park.

Here are some signals that your dog is being friendly:

- Approach other dogs slowly
- Approach from the side (even if headed toward another dog, the final few steps should involve moving toward the side of the dog and then turning toward them)
- Wagging tail
- Play bow
- Rolls over or allows other dogs to sniff
- Barking in a playful manner (you need to know your dog's different barks)
- Not paying much attention at all (this doesn't mean your dog isn't interested, just that he is not concerned with the other dogs and therefore, he doesn't need to focus on them)

Here are some signals that your dog is uncomfortable or not ready for a dog park:

- Whining

- Growling or unfriendly barking
- Ears pinned back
- Ears very forward
- Tail up (if normally down)
- Tail tucked between legs (usually means he is scared)
- Sticking his head between your legs (He's looking for you to protect him. Do so by leaving the park. He will love you for it.)
- Showing teeth
- Lunging or charging other dogs
- Bumping his shoulder into another dog
- Stealing toys
- Jumping on people
- Jumping on dogs' backs

If you have a dog that may not be friendly enough for the park, you can help him improve. Try bringing him to training classes. Also, try bringing him to the park but do not enter it. Just let him sit in the car and watch the dogs. If he is calm, on the next visit, let him walk around the parking lot on leash. Do this and the training until your trainer says that the dog is ready for the dog park. (You want to get other people's comments on the dog because we are all biased toward our wonderful animals and it is easy for us to miss something.) Then only let him in when there are just a few dogs. Even dogs that like other dogs can be overwhelmed in a crowd.

Here are the signs of a good owner and supporter of the park:

- Only bringing dogs friendly to other dogs and people
- Always picks up after his dog
- Watches his dog and other dogs for possible problems
- Throws trash in receptacles
- Let others know if their dog needs picking up after
- Never leaves the dog in the park without adult owner supervision
- Picks up any toys or Frisbees if any dog shows possessiveness (even just 1 dog)
- At any sign of trouble, removes dog immediately
- Keeps the dog leashed except in the fenced area of the park
- Licenses the dog (just visit town hall for a form)
- Donates to and/or volunteers for the park

Working together, the Chelmsford Dog Park can be a great place for our friendly dogs to exercise. Dogs that struggle with social situations are always welcome to walk in our other public lands on leash and under their owner's control.