

Playing It Safe at the Dog Park

By Michaela Greif, CPDT-KA



As dog parks have increased in popularity during the last two and a half decades, we dog owners/lovers/trainers have learned a tremendous amount about pet dog interactions in an enclosed environment.

We thank you, Pooches.

- 1. Not all dogs are dog-park dogs!** A dog park is like a crowded bar; some love the noise and social experience, while others would rather have coffee with a single friend, or go for a jog alone.
- 2. Other things to do with your pup:** Take a walk, Play ball; Get involved in dog sports and activities.
- 3. Stay involved!** Would you take your 2-year-old to the playground and then ignore him/her while you read, talk on the phone, text, etc; responding only when someone starts to scream and cry? Hopefully not! Same applies here, folks.
- 4. DOG PARK PROS:** fun, exercise, social skills development and maintenance, learning, enrichment, and positive training experiences.
DOG PARK CONS: learned fear and aggression, social skills deterioration, a “Lord of the Flies” type scenario in which dogs handle things in a National Geographic style, Wild canid or a domesticated companion—you decide.
- 5. Beware of leashing dogs within dog park upon entrance/exit.** A leashed dog, surrounded by loose one is likely to feel more vulnerable and defensive.
- 6. Any dog can be an aggressor given the right circumstances.** It's your job to know your dog and be alert to problematic behaviors in the park.

GOOD Greetings & Play

- Greetings characterized by butt sniffs, 'T' shaped approaches
- Loose, Wiggly Bodies and Wide Tail Wags (goofy and tiring)
- Play Bows
- Butt Bumps
- Vocalizations-growls, barks, snarls (tend to be quick and higher pitched)
- Paw Offering & Pawing
- Mounting and Jumping (brief and acceptable to both dogs)
- **Brief, Fair and Harmless Disagreements**

RUDE Greetings, Play & Bullying

- Face to Face, stiff-body greetings between unknown dogs
- One dog chases, pins, bites, etc... without trading roles or allowing rest
- Mob mentality: 2 or more dogs on one
- Space Invading: crowding, cornering without mutual consent (see Mobs!)
- Repeated Body Slamming

Calming, Correcting & Negotiating

Dogs have an amazing array of subtle body language cues that they employ to **diffuse tension and signal non-threatening intentions**.

- Shake Off
- Ground Sniffs
- Belly Up
- Look Away
- Submissive Urination
- Lying Down

Dogs also demonstrate their **stress levels** in a subtle manner:

- Excessive Panting (not weather or exhaustion related)
- Big Eye (lots of white, dilated pupils)
- Freezing, Cowering, Muscle Tension
- Apparent lack of interest in socializing
- Tail carriage (tucked or high and tight)
- Lowered head
- Stress Ridge (under eye; above mouth)

Dogs will also **teach/correct each other** with harmless displays:

- Loud Snarks (“Hey, cut it out!”)
- Quick & Noisy Lunge with/ Without Mouth (No Harm Done!)
- Fair and Ends Immediately (Dogs shape up or ship out!)
- Low repetition, no escalation

Trouble’s Brewing:

“Time Out” (TO) to “Time to Go”(TTG)

- Stiff Body, Long Stare, Face-to-Face/Nose-Nose [TO, TTG]
- Repeated Snarling, Snapping, Lunging [TTG]
- Repeated Charging, Body-Slamming [TTG]
- Repeated Cornering, Pinning, One-Role Play [TTG]
- Cowering, cringing, lips pulled back, wide, white eye = FEAR
- Freezing over/near (toy, food, person) w/ wide, white eye = GUARDING
- Scanning, Bracing, Targeting, Bullying = ANGER
- Scan-Freeze-Stalk-Point (non-play context) = PREDATION
- Be aware of:
 - size (big:small)
 - sound (high-pitch)
 - predilection (natural hunters + high intensity + individual history)

Potential Overstimulation:

Frequent, Pleasant Interruptions

- “Zoomies” or “Butt-on-Fire”
- Toys and Treats
- Lots of highly energized dogs (Think Happy Hour)
- Kids running around, skateboards, bikes zooming by

Breaking Up A Dog Fight

- Stay as calm as possible so as not to add more fuel to the fire.
- Create a loud or dramatic disruption [air horn, shake can, hose].
- Collect non-fighting dogs to prevent a mob.
- Avoid putting your hands, face, etc ... near dog mouths, as redirection is common. If necessary, grab back legs of fighting dogs, like a wheelbarrow.
- Afterwards: Remove dogs immediately to a safe area away from park. Stress levels may stay high for 2-3 days afterwards, so it may be best to avoid the park during this time.

We hope you found this information useful. Let us know if we can be of further help.

We work with dogs and their owners in Philadelphia, Quakertown and the surrounding areas. Certified, award-winning, and vet recommended. We offer: Classes & Workshops, In-Home Private Lessons, Behavior Problem Solving, and Boarding School. For more information, visit OpBarks.com.