

14 Ways

to Stay Happy and Safe

at the **Dog Park**

New to the park? This info is for you! One of the regulars? It's for you, too! The dog park is a great place for all of our canine companions – small and large, young and old, spunky and not-so-spunky - to socialize, play, and exercise. Dog parks depend 100% on the dogs and people who visit them to be safe, happy places; take these 14 simple tips to heart and help us make this park just that!

1. Don't fall behind on vet care

The dog park is like a daycare: you've got lots of (furry) kids from all kinds of homes and medical backgrounds, coming to one place to play and wrestle and share toys, treats, and saliva. It's the perfect place for pets to swap germs. Keeping your dog current on all preventive care is absolutely essential to making sure your pet – and every pet he plays with – stays healthy. **Preventive care includes all vaccines, not just rabies;** in fact, the distemper combo shot that protects against parvo and the bordetella shot that protects against kennel cough are much more important in a social setting like a dog park. Disease and parasites spread through touch, saliva, shared water supply, and feces: all things your dog encounters at the park. **Don't take a risk, and don't put other dogs at risk: always keep your dog current on vaccines, deworming, and parasite prevention! If your dog is not fully protected, the dog park isn't the place for him.**

2. Dogs in heat don't belong at the park

Better yet, have your dog (male or female) fixed! We won't go into the birds and the bees, but when an unspayed dog is in heat, every other dog in a 5 mile radius knows; the dogs at the park are no exception. What is likely to ensue is aggressive competition – between both neutered and unneutered males – for her affections. **When you bring a dog in heat to the dog park, you put the safety of every dog at risk.** Even without the presence of a female in heat, unneutered males are prone to aggressive behavior towards other dogs. There are a million reasons to spay and neuter your pets (see **"Spay and Neuter Saves Lives"**), but at the dog park, the biggest reason is that it's the responsible thing to do to keep everybody safe.

3. Puppies in the park...good or bad?

There are a lot of things to consider before bringing your puppy to the park. Age is one; **it's generally not recommended to bring any puppy under 4 months old to the dog park**, simply because they are more susceptible to disease and injury. The biggest health concern with puppies, though, is the possibility of contracting or spreading parvo. **If you have had your puppy for less than two weeks and/or if it has not had at least two rounds of monthly distemper combo shots, he should absolutely not visit the dog park.** Parvo is difficult and expensive to treat, spreads extremely easily, and is often fatal. Although it's less common, parvo CAN spread to adult dogs as well; older dogs and certain breeds, like Rottweilers, Dobermans, pit bulls, or mixes are more susceptible to the disease.

4. Know your dog's limits

Every dog is different, and you know your dog better than anyone; it's up to you to know how much he can handle and when it's time to step back and take a break. **If you know that your dog is reactive with other dogs, protective of toys or treats, not good with smaller dogs, etc. take active steps to avoid**

putting him in a situation that will result in a fight. In a place like a dog park, where so many dogs come and go, it's almost inevitable that your dog will have one or two acquaintances that he doesn't quite get along with and it's easy to feel like the other party is the one at fault. And maybe they are. But be flexible; it's in everyone's best interest to avoid a fight. When your dog is telling you that he's had enough, grab a buddy or two and move to the other side of the park, or just head home. It's not worth anyone getting hurt.

5. Expect to share toys and treats

Like people, some dogs share well with others and some don't. If you know that your dog is protective of toys or treats, make sure toys are removed from the park before it becomes an issue; most dogs are perfectly happy to play with their buddies without a Frisbee or a tennis ball between them. If you're unable to remove toys or treats from the equation, grab a buddy or two and move to the other side of the park, where you have more control over the play dynamic. And use common sense: any toy or treat you bring to the park is likely to attract the attention of every dog there, not just your own...so **don't bring anything to the park that you know your dog won't want to share.**

6. Is that play or...?

As you already know (and if you don't, you're about to find out), play at the dog park can get pretty rowdy. Many dogs wrestle, compete for toys, and chase each other – and many are very vocal while they do it. While growling, nipping, and barking may indicate aggressive behavior, they're often harmless play; it's up to you to know the difference between the two so that you can step in when things get heated, and let dogs be dogs when they don't. **Stiff, upright posture is an indicator that things may be shifting from play to aggression.** If you're concerned that things may be going that way, don't let it go far enough to become a fight: remove your dog from the interaction and let everybody cool down before rejoining the play. And remember, one dog's rowdy play might be another dog's worst nightmare, so **if you notice that your dog's play is scaring or intimidating another dog, step in and give the scared dog a break.** Your dog may be having a blast, but every dog in the park has a right to be there and feel safe.

7. In case it's not play...

If things get out of hand, **it is never a good idea to use your hands or feet to break up a fight.** Once dogs are in fight-mode, they don't know the difference between you and another assailant; putting your hands or feet between two fighting dogs is the best, quickest way to get yourself bitten and your dog in a world of trouble. Use water (grab the hose or a spray bottle), or a loud noise to break the dogs' concentration – an air horn works great – and use the distraction as an opportunity to separate, leash, and remove the dogs from the situation. Don't leave before making sure that everyone involved is ok – your dog, the other dog, and any other people that might have gotten involved. **If there are kids in the park, they should never, ever be allowed to get involved in breaking up a fight.**

8. Constant vigilance!

You're responsible for your dog's behavior at the park, so **keep an eye on him.** It's easy to get distracted, since dog parks are social spots for people, too, but there's no better way to stop problems before they happen than by knowing what your dog is up to at all times.

9. Good commands go a long way

There are a few basic commands that your dog should know before coming to the park: **“leave it,” “off,” and recall (coming when you call)**. A dog who knows “leave it” is less likely to hog toys or treats (and less likely to eat or roll in something...unseemly). A dog who knows “off” is less likely to annoy your human and canine dog park friends by jumping all over everybody. And a dog who comes when he’s called is less likely to dart off through an open gate, and more likely to retreat from a potentially aggressive situation when you ask him to.

10. Always have a leash and collar

It’s nice to let your dog run free and naked at the park, but consider this: if your dog does get into a fight, and doesn’t have a collar on, and you don’t have a leash on you...what control do you have over the situation? The answer: not a whole heck of a lot. **The less control you have, the more likely you and your dog both are to get hurt.** Plus, it’s the law: dogs are required to wear proof of their current rabies vaccination in public.

11. Watch the gate

Your dog may come right in and not give an open gate a second thought, but that’s not true for everybody at the park. **Always close and latch the gate behind you**, and keep an eye on the other dogs while you’re coming and going.

12. Keep the park clean

There are poo bags and trash cans available in both sides of the park; put them to good use. Nobody wants to spend time in a filthy park, and a filthy park is also a health hazard for your dog, so **do your part: pick up after your pooch!** Throw away any trash or food wrappers you might bring into the park, too; and if you’re the last one to leave the park in the evening, it’s a good idea to **dump out the pools and water bowls.** The last thing you want are more mosquitoes!

13. Kids in the park...good or bad?

The dog park is, first and foremost, a place for dogs. Before you bring your kids to the park, consider that there may be dogs at the park that are great with other dogs, but uncomfortable with children; **bringing kids to the park may make other dog park users feel unwelcome, and may even put your kids at risk.** If you do bring your kids to the park, it is your responsibility to make sure that they are well-supervised and know how to safely interact with dogs: no running, no yelling, no chasing, and always, always ask a dog’s owner before attempting to touch him. **No child should ever be in the park without close adult supervision.** If your child is not interacting appropriately with the dogs in the park, it’s time to head home.

14. Communicate

If you have concerns about the behavior or health of other dogs in the park, **talk it out with the dog’s owner.** The more you know about your fellow dog park visitors, both the two-legged and the four-legged ones, the closer you are to resolving any problems that might arise. Remember, a dog park is a public place and it is what you make it; **a friendly, respectful, and safe environment starts with you and your dog.**