



**OPPORTUNITY**  
BEHAVIOR **BARKS** TRAINING  
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RESOURCE GUIDE

# Dog Parks

Dog parks. Loved by many humans, but...not so much for every dog. We get asked about dog parks all the time. What do you think about dog parks? Well, dog parks have become increasingly popular during the last few decades, allowing dog owners to exercise their dogs in an enclosed environment. These parks give owners the safety and confidence to let dogs roam leashless and encounter four-legged playmates of all shapes and sizes: rare luxuries for many pooches. Dog parks are often a positive social experience for dog owners, too, bringing together area residents and building community spirit.

However, many dog trainers have mixed feelings about what actually happens in a typical dog park. Play and exercise are vital parts of any dog's life, but the behavioral free-for-all that sometimes goes down is enough to make us queasy. Wellmeaning owners may allow their dogs to engage in behavior that is rank related and neither playful nor helpful in creating a mannerly canine. So, Opportunity Barks hopes to help you become savvier about dog behavior with other dogs and the responsibility to engage in safe play and know when your dog just isn't appropriate for play in a non-structured environment

## Is a dog park a good fit for your dog?

Not all dogs are dog-park dogs. A dog park can be like a crowded bar: some love the noise, others prefer coffee with a friend, or going for a solo jog. Your dog may be a social animal, who simply feels uncomfortable in the hustle-bustle of a crowded dog party. Just like us, dogs may also change their preferences as they mature. There are plenty of other ways to exercise and play with your dog, including long walks, nature sniffing on a long line, playing fetch, swimming, or getting involved in dog-centric sports like Agility or Nosework.

Let's be frank. Sometimes we use the dog park for our own purposes, not for our dogs. Ask yourself why you take Fido to the park: is it so that you can socialize?...or because you can text or talk while your dog wears himself out?...did you skip training your dog to walk nicely on leash, or to play nicely with you? Dogs and humans are social animals, and the relationship that we develop is the whole point, right? We often require our pets to curb their natural doggie exuberance until we return from work.- To keep things balanced and the relationship healthy, you and your dog need and deserve to spend some quality time together. This means truly being involved with your dog. Would you take your 2-year-old to the playground, then turn your attention elsewhere? Hopefully not! Same applies here, folks. Stay relevant! You should be regularly calling your dog to you from play, involving yourself in play, and providing a brief respite from intense play.

## Being safe at dog parks

It's okay to want to engage with your pooch and give her the chance to run and play, but you should know that any dog can learn bad habits, and you want to responsibly understand and be alert to canine behavior. Dog play involves activities like nipping, mouthing, wrestling, chasing, and a whole variety of expressions and vocalizations that may look pretty rough and tumble. The key is that good play is characterized by mutual interaction and frequent role changes. Spot chases Boomer, Boomer chases Spot. Daisy wrestles Jolly to the ground, Jolly climbs back on top of the pile.

### SOME THINGS YOU MIGHT SEE IN GREETINGS AND PLAY:

- The dog handshake: butt and mouth sniff, curved approaches
- Loose, wiggly bodies and wide tail wags
- Play bows (bum in the air, elbows on the ground) and butt bumps
- Quick, high pitched vocalizations: growls, barks, snarls
- Pawing, mounting, jumping, humping shared by both dogs

Dogs will also teach and correct each other with brief and largely harmless displays. This is especially true of older dogs playing with young puppy upstarts. If your pup isn't taking the hint, or your older dog is getting repeatedly irritated, get in there and be the playground monitor. Give your puppy a time out, or take your frustrated pooch out for a breather.

## SOME WAYS AN OLDER DOG MIGHT GIVE A PUP IMPORTANT FEEDBACK:

- Loud snarks [“Hey, cut it out!”]
- Quick & noisy lunge with or without harmless contact
- Fair, ends immediately, low repetition, and no escalation

Not all dogs have the most polished social skills. Some dogs (ahem, we are looking at you, adolescent male dogs!) come on a bit strong or skip some of the finer points of doggy greetings. This doesn't make your dog anti-social, it simply means you need to be aware of how he is affecting other dogs, and be ready to step in early and frequently.

When your dog, or a dog interacting with your own, isn't playing nice repeatedly, it's time to separate them or move on.

## PUSHY BEHAVIORS TO BE ALERT TO:

- Less than stellar greetings- stiff posture, nose-nose, high and quick tail wag
- One dog chases, pins, bites, etc... without trading roles or allowing rest
- Mob mentality: 2 or more dogs on one (even the nicest dog can bully, with backup)
- Space invading: crowding, cornering without mutual consent, repeat body-slaming

Dogs sometimes shake off (as though they are wet), look away, lick their lips, sniff the ground, lie down, go belly up, or submissively urinate to signal that they are “Not a Threat!” to another dog. Much of the time, both dogs get it, and alter their behavior accordingly. However, sometimes your dog may just be stressed out and not enjoying himself at all.

## STRESS SIGNALS TO LOOK OUT FOR:

- Excessive panting (not weather or exhaustion related)
- “Whale” eye (lots of white, dilated pupils)
- Ongoing freezing, cowering, muscle tension, hiding
- Lowered head, tucked tail, repeated barking and snarling at other dogs

What if a dog fight does break out? Stay calm. Grab your dog if he is not involved and prevent him from joining the fray. For fighting dogs, create a distraction (e.g. air horn, bang two water bowls, shake can, hose, or water bottle). Grasp dogs by the hind legs, lifting as you would a wheelbarrow, rather than reaching for collars or the teeth-end of the dog! Immediately remove fighting dogs from one-another and trade contact information quickly before leaving the park. Since stress levels may stay high for 2-3 days, it is best to avoid the park for a bit.

If your dog is getting into regular scuffs, get in touch with a trainer who can help to guide you to better canine social experiences and train the key impulse control and engagement skills to help pump the brakes on arousal off-leash and help the dog tune in to the handler (you).