

Before You Go To The Dog Park

Off-leash parks are great resources for exercising, stimulating and socializing dogs. Here are a few things to consider before going there with your dog.

Will your dog enjoy the park?

Not all dogs enjoy playing with unfamiliar dogs, particularly upon reaching social maturity (2-3 years of age). Young puppies who have not yet received a rabies vaccination should avoid the park for two reasons: disease prevention and the risk of being frightened by large, older dogs. Take young puppies instead to supervised playgroups (such as those offered at the AHS Training School) or “play dates” with friends’ puppies to ensure that their first several interactions are pleasant ones. Finally, dogs that display aggression toward people or dogs are not candidates for the dog park. For more details click [here](#).

Does your dog come when called?

Practice calling your dog to come. Start in your living room, and gradually work up to practicing across several rooms and in the backyard (as long as it is fenced!). Reward your dog generously each time he comes to you. Why is this important? Knowing your dog will likely come when called is a safety issue. What if play gets too rough, or a fight breaks out? What if you simply would like to leave and can’t get your dog to follow you? Wait until your dog will come to you most of the time before introducing her to off-leash play.

Children at the dog park

Keep children close by and under direct control: they should not run around, scream or encourage dogs to chase them, as this could result in serious injury. Not all dogs are familiar with children and may perceive running and screaming as prey behavior. Small children allowed to wander among groups of playing dogs may be knocked over or stepped on, possibly creating a long-term fear of dogs in general.

Dog park manners

There’s no delicate way to say this: not all owners who attend dog parks show good judgment about their own dogs’ behavior. Many people have difficulty distinguishing normal play behavior from bullying, and may not realize their dog is being rude. Others may mistake arousal for playfulness, allowing a potentially dangerous situation to develop. If you feel your dog is becoming overwhelmed, take him out. The benefits of exercise are lost if the dog experiences only stress and anxiety.

On the other end, some owners become very frightened when observing normal dog-dog interactions, sometimes perceiving a “fight” where none exists. It’s important to remember that puppies learn proper social skills from well-socialized adult dogs, who will teach them their limits without causing harm. An adult who growls and barks at a puppy that has jumped on his head is not fighting; he’s saying, “That’s unacceptable...cut it out.”

Permits

Make sure your dog is wearing her off-leash permit tag (if required) so that park officials can verify it if needed. This not only shows them that your dog is up to date with her vaccinations, but that you are a responsible owner with the public’s safety in mind. The more dog owners are perceived as responsible and caring, the better our dogs’ prospects for future off-leash play options.