

## Dog Park Use and Safety

Karen Peak

[West Wind Dog Training](#)



*Though I mention prong collars in this piece, I am personally against their use for various reasons. I was taught how to use them and why to avoid them. I mention them because many owners and trainers still use them and therefore, I have to address them.*

Ahhhhh, Dog Parks, touted by so many as the ideal place for dogs to be dogs, owners to meet and greet, open space in otherwise crowded areas for man's best friend. Dog parks, others call them great places for fights, illness and lawsuits. What is the truth? It lies somewhere in between, with your individual dog and you. Dog parks offer dogs a great opportunity to socialize, burn off energy and learn about their own species. Dog parks tend to have people who do not mind muddy paws on them, who will understand when an owner tries to teach manners, and, in general, are more tolerant. However, dog parks are high stress environments. Sadly, far too many dogs are socially retarded when it comes to other dogs and interacting with humans outside the family. Socially delayed dogs, one who are easily stressed, have confidence issues; control freaks, etc, and may not be able to handle the issues a dog park has are as likely to be brought to parks just as easily as a dog who is easy going and unflappable may relish every visit. The constant turnover of dogs, "hierarchy" changes, the noise, running, smells, fewer resources shared among many dogs may be a trigger for escalating stress and eventually, fights. Many dog owners assume their dogs will do fine at a dog park or if their dog has socializing issues, that a dog park will be a magic pill and cure the dog. So, how can we keep dog parks safer? First, we need to determine if our dog is cut out for a park.

What is the best dog for a dog park? There is none. **There is no perfect breed or dog for a park.** Reproductive status is also less important than the individual dog. Not all intact males will fight just as not all neutered males will be passive. Yes, testosterone can play a role in behavior but it is not the only factor. Some of the worst fights I have seen involved neutered animals. Some of the best behaved dogs in groups I have seen were intact dogs.

Dogs are living creatures and not programmable computers. They have good and bad days, likes and dislikes. In order to be able to handle the stresses of a dog park, a dog needs to be well trained and socialized. Each breed has different inherent drives. Within breeds, individual dogs will have higher or lower drives than average. It is important to know the drives behind a breed then how your dog works within those expectations. Is your dog of a breed known to be more dog aggressive, hair trigger when it comes to chasing, known for being scrappy or take charge? How does your dog fall in the realm of what

is the norm for his breed? Many dogs will not necessarily start an incident, but who is to know what they will perceive as a challenge? A dog must be very tolerant of the antics of other dogs, people and easy going. You must have good physical and voice control over your dog. My personal opinion is if the ONLY way you can control your dog is through training aids such as head halters and prong collars, the dog is not ready for a dog park. You do not have enough control. If your dog does not respond when called especially if there is a lot of distraction, does not know a cue to leave something alone, has possession issues, low tolerance levels, or fear issues, he is not a candidate for dog parks. I would never bring a Fila Brasileiro or Tosa to a dog park. However, there are people who would. I would not bring a Chihuahua to a dog park, but I have seen it. I have seen wonderful pit bulls and horrible Labs at dog parks. There is no best dog for a dog park; there are only dogs that may be better suited depending on what is occurring that day with the dog and the other dogs at the park.

How do you know if your dog may be appropriate for a dog park? If your dog can handle being bumped, jostled, crowded by other dogs, grabbed at by animals and people, who will not fight over toys, treats or water, who is slow to rile up, responsive to you during times of high stress/distraction/activity, who can handle life as it happens, does well in groups of dogs that are variable (never the same dogs each visit), then try a dog park. If not, work with your dog or completely avoid them and find other alternatives. Under no circumstances should you bring a dog new to your home to a dog park. When I used to frequent parks, I met new owners who literally came straight from the shelter to the park! They did not know the dogs and were already placing them in high anxiety situations. Just because the adoption counselor says "Good with other dogs" does not mean good with all dogs or good with dogs in higher stress environments. I have spoken with people who had dog aggressive dogs or dogs that are high stress and excessively reactive to stimuli trying to break the dogs of it like they saw a trainer on TV do. The owners chose a dog park to mimic what they saw. Saturation and stress can make behaviors worse in the end. It takes a dog that is sound and solid to handle a dog park. If possible, visit the dog park off peak hours, especially the first few times. Shoving a dog not used to crowds of dogs into a mix of a couple dozen dogs or more is courting trouble.

As a dog owner, you must remember that just because your dog gets along with the other dogs in the house or neighbor's dogs, does not mean he will get along at a dog park. For example, my Great Pyrenees, a breed generally NOT recommended by good breeders or rescues for dog parks, was fine at parks as long as she was the tallest dog there. She did not mind dogs coming and going, ignored bratty dogs jumping at her face or grabbing her tail; however, when I saw the local Scottish Deerhounds approach, I would call her back and we would leave. She would go on alert when she saw the dogs and monitor their every move. Another more graphic illustration came from a Great Pyrenees rescue group that had a dog returned due to a fight.

An adopter, against the recommendation of the rescue, insisted on taking his Great Pyrenees to dog parks. Quickly, the dog would start to patrol and mark. Great Pyrenees were bred to guard their environment and anything within from predators. Over time, the dog began to treat the park as his own turf. Soon, he began attacking dogs that entered after he arrived. Dogs that were there before he arrived were fine, but dogs entering after this dog were not. When the dog was adopted, the owner was told not to bring the dog to parks and why. The owner assumed because his dog was fine with neighboring dogs that he would do well at a park. The dog was returned for fighting at the park. After all this, you think your dog is ready for a park; you must put safety as your top priority.

Dog park safety begins before you enter the park. If you have limited control of your dog without the use of a head halter or prong collar, if he does not respond to you in high stress/distraction

environments, your dog needs more work before considering a dog park. You need to be able to safely walk your dog in and out, call away from potentially dangerous situations and be able to get him out of there fast if needed. Many dogs learn to pull into prongs and will hurt themselves to get back to the fracas. A dog lunging against a head halter can do damage to his neck. Head halters and prongs take longer to put on than snapping a leash to a collar or even making a quick noose of the lead and walking a dog away. There are those who disagree with me. However, there is a difference between using a tool to increase your control over a dog in situations where you are not sure about yet and using one to control your dog because it is the ONLY way you can remotely handle the dog. Make sure you are aware of this difference and how your dog responds.

When approaching a dog park, a dog should be on a lead of no more than six feet and not at the end of it. The further away a dog is from you, the less control you have. What if your dog is at the end of a retractable leash (15 – 25' away) and you cannot get him to reel in and someone approaches with a dog also on a retractable lead? Neither of you have good control over your dogs. I have no issue with these leads used under certain circumstances, but dog parks are NOT these times. I have seen dogs at the end of long leads go after each other, tangle, owners panic, dogs are fighting harder and there is no way to disengage the dogs because of the long leads wrapped around struggling bodies like a spider's silk around a fly. This increases the chance of a serious bite to an intervening human.

Before you enter the park, stop and observe. Look for issues going on before you enter. Are there large packs of dogs racing wildly after a single dog? It is common for scuffs and even all out fights to occur with dogs in the heat of a chase. It is a small step from a chase to a hunt: from jostling another dog out of position to a brawl. Is there one dog hovering over the water bowls and not happy when other dogs approach? Are there owners playing fetch with dogs that are obsessing over the ball – especially if you have a ball-obsessed dog? Are there any dogs getting “in the face” of other dogs with their tails way up, hackles up, ears pitched forward? Are there any dogs cowering away and trying to escape the throng? These are just a few warning signs that stresses are high at the park. Each of these scenarios could fast escalate into a fight. A rule of thumb: if in doubt of anything you see, do not visit the park at that point. It is better to be safe than sorry and even sued.

Never take your lead off before you enter the park. Even if there is an “air lock” (double gate) to enter, make sure your dog is safely behind BOTH gates before that lead comes off. If there is another unleashed dog in the “air lock”, do not enter until the dog is safely leashed and out of the “air lock.” Expect when you enter the park that a horde of dogs will greet yours. Watch the dogs as you enter. If you see any starting to snarl and snap at each other in anticipation of your dog entering or your dog goes on alert with hackles up and teeth bared, leave. Walk about a little, see if the horde relaxes and/or your dog settles, then return. If the situation(s) persist, instead of entering, just go for a nice walk.

While at the park, supervise, supervise, and supervise. I cannot emphasize this enough. Watch not only your dog but also the dogs around yours. I have seen everything from owners congregating in corners and never looking at the dogs again to people dropping dogs off and going outside the area for some reason. Watch the body language of the other dogs for changes in intensity of play, going from appearing laidback to ears pinned, dogs acting “snarky” over a ball or treat. A dog starting to hover over water bowls or a toy and driving others away or a dog ignoring “back off” signals from other dogs must be addressed immediately. If an owner has his/her back turned to the dogs, is plugged into an i-Pod or cell phone or even worse, watching the dogs and ignoring worrisome, behaviors, get out of there. Sadly, if you own “certain breeds” or dogs that look a “certain” way, even if your dog was not the instigator, someone will spin and incident to your dog being the cause. Many owners just do not see or want to

understand how the behaviors of their dogs can bring out the “beast” in even the most tolerant animal. I had a client whose pit bull type dog was attacked at a dog park. The pit bull type did not start it, but who was blamed for bringing a “killer breed” into the park?

What should happen if a fight ensues? First is try to remain as calm as possible. Screaming and yelling can cause the fight to escalate. Second, there are no 100% safe ways to break up a fight. Some are better than others are. Never, if possible, try to break one up alone. If there is water about, you can try to see if a good dousing will startle the dogs into stopping. Banging two metal pans together may help as well – especially if the dogs are not “serious” about the fight. One of the worst things you can do is get between two fighting dogs, grab collars and try to pull apart; you are likely to be bitten. If your dog is NOT one of the ones involved with the fight, you must immediately get your dog restrained and out of the park. The last thing you need is your dog adding to the fracas or becoming involved in another fight secondary to the first.

If your dog is involved in the fight, no matter how sweet and loving he is at home, he is now fighting, adrenaline is rushing and he may as willingly bite you as he is biting the other dog. So, how do you pull two dogs apart? Try what is commonly called the wheelbarrow technique. Grab the dogs (or the aggressor if one dog is down) by the rear legs lift and pull back. Dogs are strong so hold tight. Keep moving in a circle so the dog cannot wheel around as effectively and try to nail the holder in his possible desire to get back to the fight or in his panic to escape. (Dogs who are afraid will fight if needed). Other people may advise use of a breaking stick. This is basically a lever inserted into a dog’s mouth to pry loose the hold on another dog. If you are not certain how to use this and have help, you put yourself at greater risk; you are at mouth level with hands close to the line of attack. Remember, fighting dogs may not even be aware of who they are going after, they are hyped up: this is a very dangerous situation for the humans involved. Luckily, many dog fights are all show and little serious damage. Sadly, some fights escalate severely and will not end until one dog is critically injured or dead. You can never state your dog will not fight or bite. Any dog can and will if the need is felt. These are animals and have a need for self-preservation. Dogs not suited for parks for whatever reason are more likely to cause a problem or be involved in an altercation. This is why it is vital to ensure your dog is able to handle the stressors because the person next you may have brought a dog who is not.

Once apart, get the dogs apart and out of the park fast. BOTH dogs need to leave. If they are just separated until they appear settled and then released, chances are greater that the dogs will go back to fighting. If one dog stays, he is in a heightened state (adrenaline) and more likely to scuff with other dogs. Get the dogs to the respective vehicles, call animal control, and get information of the other dog owners and witnesses. The best thing to do is stop trouble before it starts. If you see anything that looks like trouble brewing, get your dog out, even if your dog is not involved, he could become so when he sees what is going on.

When you are done at the park for whatever reason, leave in the same manner you came. Leash your dog, walk to the gate, enter, close one behind, ensuring no other dogs snuck in behind you, and open the second. Keep your dog on a short lead, do not hover outside the gate talking (if you need to talk with someone, move to the side), and head out.

Now we must discuss human behavior at dog parks. Along with making sure your dog is able to handle the stresses if a dog park, willing to accept the safety of your dog and others, you must follow up with good manners. First is personal behavior. As fast as scuffs between dogs can happen, so can altercations between humans. No matter how irritated you are, that other dog is someone’s baby and the owner will

protect a precious “pup”. When you are dealing with owners, be calm and think about your words. For example, when trying to leave, you are being accosted by a goofy Lab whose owner is oblivious to what is going on. You are trying to get through the first gate and the Lab keeps forging in front of your dog. Instead of yelling would the owner of this dog get him, wording such as “I am afraid someone’s dog is trying to follow me home,” may be better received. Clean up after your dog and bring poop bags. Should your park provide communal water bowls, help keep them filled. If your dog digs a hole, fill it in. Do not treat the park as you would your yard, treat it as a place you are visiting and want to be able to visit again. Bad manners among dogs and humans could get the local residents calling for closing of the park.

Finally, consider the physical health of your dog. Behavioral has been discussed but dog parks are the canine equivalent of a ball pit for kids: disease factories. Make sure your dog is clear of parasites and up to date on all vaccines. Never assume the owner of the dog next to your dog will have current anything. Dog parks are great places to pick up kennel cough, canine influenza, parvo virus and parasites. Never allow your dog’s rabies vaccines to expire. Know your local laws as well. Some areas you have the month to get the vaccine updated while others is by the date of last vaccine (so if the vet gave the last vaccine on June 15, on June 16 the year the vaccine is due, your dog may be considered unvaccinated). Do not bring your dog if he has had vomiting or diarrhea within the past 48 hours, if he is acting lethargic or just off. Dogs that are off their game, not feeling well or in some level of discomfort, will be less tolerant of situations. If your dog is limping, keep him home. Again, that tolerance issue and you do not want the injury to worsen.

OK, so you have decided against visiting a dog park, now what? There are alternatives to dog parks. Many training facilities are offering supervised playgroups. These should be monitored by trainers and volunteers who should have a decent understanding of dogs and be able to identify trouble before it starts. Since these are often pay-to-play sessions, they may not be as crowded. See if there is a “meet-up” group regionally (<http://www.meetup.com>). Get together with friends for play dates at different houses. If your dog happens not to be suited for any of these activities, then be his best friend, get active with long walks, activities such as Agility or Rally-O, and understand that not all dogs can play nice with others.

Suggested reading for understanding dogs and dog language (please note these are just for informational purposes only and should not take the place of professional assistance):

[Fight! A Practical Guide To The Treatment Of Dog-Dog Aggression](#) by Jean Donaldson

[Mine! A Practical Guide to Resource Guarding](#) by Jean Donaldson

[On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals](#) by Turid Rugaas

There are some books on dog park safety available at <http://www.DogWise.com>

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