



Dog Parks

Behavior, Play, Body Language, and Safety

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DOG PARKS

Greeting Rituals:

Certain rituals occur when two dogs meet. If there is a variation of these rituals you may be seeing the first sign of problems between these two dogs.

Dogs usually approach one another sideways rather than head on. They will sniff each other's faces then move toward the rear end to sniff. It is important to allow this entire process to occur.

If one or both dogs freeze and fail to complete the ritual, redirect them by calling them toward you. Use short, staccato vocalizations to get the dog's attention. Try not to pull the dogs away from each other with the leash or collar, as this will cause frustration and could lead to aggressive behavior. The sequence stops during the greeting because there may be fear and/or aggression brewing. Wait a minute or two and start again.

Dogs that approach other dogs in a rude manner by pouncing on the other dog's head without stopping to sniff will often be reprimanded by the other dog. This is to be expected, but still needs to be monitored. It's best not to let two dogs meet when one or both are overly excited or stimulated at the time of the meeting. They need time to settle down before allowing them to meet.

Behavior is ever-changing and will be affected by many factors – time of day, individual dogs in the group affecting the 'group dynamic,' changes at home, health, diet, changes in staff members overseeing the playgroups, and aging (the first time the dog boards with us he may be 7 months old, and the second time 1 year of age). There can be big changes in behavior, particularly during the maturing stage (7 months to 2 years of age).

Appropriate Owner Behavior:

1. All interactions people have with the dogs in the park should be calm and controlled.
2. Owners should refrain from picking dogs up while they are inside the park. This may cause other dogs to jump up and nip at the person or the dog being held, which may cause injury.
3. Do not quickly grab a dog's collar. He may become startled and could suddenly snap. Instead, be sure to gently take hold of the collar, and talk in a calm voice while leading the dog away.
4. Avoid pushing dogs into each other while moving them. If a dog is put into another dog's personal space without invitation this could cause problems.
6. The potential for dog fights increases if the group of dogs crowds around people or into a tighter space. It is important to avoid any behavior that would encourage crowding of the dogs.
7. Owners should avoid standing in corners, or sitting on the ground. Placing yourself lower than the dogs will usually cause them to crowd around you wanting to interact. Injury could occur to you or the other dogs in this situation.
8. All food should be prohibited in the playgroup area. This includes food people are eating or dog treats/food of any kind.

9. Valuable items, such as rawhide, pig ears and toys should be kept out of the playgroup area to reduce the possibility of aggressive behavior in the group. If a dog is going after his/her own ball or Frisbee, it is fine to do this as long as there aren't other dogs getting involved in the game. If other dogs do intervene, it is best to either stop playing this game with your dog, or to take your dog to the area designated for individual dogs.

Appropriate Dog Behavior/Play:

1. Appropriate Play (what it looks like)
 - a. Body Movements
 - i) Trading places
 - ii) Handicap themselves
 - iii) Invite by appearing smaller (play bows)
 - iv) Circular movements
 - v) Wide, relaxed tail wags
 - vi) Body is curvy/soft
 - vii) Lots of bouncing
 - viii) Body sideways – toward other dog(s)
 - ix) Stalk, chase
 - x) Bared teeth
 - xi) Ambush
 - xii) T Position (head over the shoulders of the other dog)
 - xiii) Shoulder/hip slams
 - xiv) Circling and pushing
 - xv) Boxing or sparring
 - xvi) Attacking
 - xvii) Mounting with or without pelvic thrust
 - xviii) Biting littermates' face/head/neck area
 - xix) Ears very erect or very flattened
 - xx) Growling vocalizations
 - b. Facial Expressions
 - i) Side looks
 - ii) Ears slightly back and relaxed
 - iii) Eyes more 'squinty'
2. Play Styles
 - a. Bouncy
 - b. Herding dogs
 - c. Loud physical dogs
 - d. Spastic dogs
 - e. Boxing dogs
 - f. Wrestling dogs ('pit' breeds, some labs)
 - g. Bullying dogs (this is not play)

3. Minor Problematic Play (orange flag)
 - a. Overly enthusiastic
 - b. Going vertical
 - c. Body slamming
 - d. Barking in another dog's face
 - e. Humping
 - f. Dominant 'pose'
 - g. Straight on
 - h. "Power" breeds
 - i) Mastiffs
 - ii) Pit Bull/Staffordshire Terriers
 - iii) Great Danes
 - iv) Shepherds
 - v) Terriers
4. Cut Off Signals
 - a. Sitting down
 - b. Freezing
 - c. Looking/turning away
 - d. Shaking off
 - e. Scratching head/neck
 - f. Sniffing ground
 - g. Stretching
 - h. Submissive grin
5. Serious Problematic Play (red flag)
 - a. Stalking
 - b. Stiff tail (wagging or not)
 - c. Staring
 - d. Closing mouth
 - e. High arousal
 - f. Bullies – ignores calming and/or cutoff signals (won't let up)
 - g. Inappropriate – didn't learn how to play appropriately when young
 - h. Very rough – has caused skin breaks when 'playing' with other dogs
 - i. Extreme body slammers
6. Aggression
 - a. Types of aggression (see SSPCA handout)
 - b. Managing – what to do – prevent if possible – prior to serious problematic play
 - walk between
 - call dogs away
 - verbal interruptive
 - water bottle (if available)
 - loud noise
 - Spray Shield
 - Physically breaking up 'full-blown' fights
 - * Always pull out the aggressor first
 - * Stand behind the dog, grasping both back legs (closest to stomach), lift legs off the ground and back up

Dog Behavior:

1. Jumping - when a dog jumps on you, you want to turn away (and then maybe even walk away) ignoring the dog that is jumping up. Petting or even saying something like “get down” is giving the dog attention, which is just what the dog wants, and is rewarding to the dog.
2. Mounting – This is a fairly common behavior that dogs do to one another. It is primarily a sign of dominance, and is not usually sexual in nature. Some dogs will become very aggressive if mounted by another dog, which could lead to fighting. If the mounting behavior continues more than a couple of seconds, immediately interrupt the behavior using a short staccato sound (Agh! Or Hey!) and move toward the dog to let him/her know that you are about to intervene with this behavior. If the dog is still mounting once you are close to the dog, walk into the dog (no need to use hands!), letting him/her know that moving away is what you are making the dog do.
3. Poop eating – Picking up feces immediately will reduce this problem. There will be dogs that enjoy doing this. Some will even guard the poop and growl at other dogs or people who approach it. Distract the poop eating dog when another dog is getting ready to go. Immediate cleanup is really the only solution to this problem.
4. Barking – there are several reasons why dogs bark. Some will bark during play, some bark if anyone looks at them over the fence in the playgroup area either out of fear or being territorial, some may bark because they are stressed, and others may bark at people just to get attention. It is important to reduce the amount of barking in the dog park area because it may irritate other dogs (and people!) and detracts from a fun, pleasant environment. The first approach would be to interrupt/distract the barker and then direct him to do something else. Say the dog’s name, then make a staccato sound with your voice, then encourage him to come toward you. the dog is barking due to excessive stress, the dog park environment may not be for him.

Controlling Inappropriate Behavior:

1. Interrupting behavior – There are several ways to interrupt dogs. One of the first to try is to walk up to the two dogs playing, call their names in a happy high-pitched voice, or act silly. This will usually get the dogs to focus on you and stop what they were doing.
2. Timeouts – timeouts can help deter inappropriate behavior. If a dog is displaying a behavior, such as barking, say “timeout” and gently lead the dog to a crate. Set a timer for 2 minutes and return him to the playgroup area. The timeout is used for safety and training, not as a way to relieve the staff’s frustrations.
3. Citronella Collar – This is a collar that would be worn by a dog that is an excessive barker. When the dog barks it will emit a puff of citronella spray which goes toward the dog’s face. This is a very strong deterrent for many dogs that bark. If the dog is barking out of fear or anxiety, it is not a good idea to utilize the collar. They will generally bark regardless of the spray, and the collar will become ineffective. The collar can sometimes go off if a dog near the one wearing the collar barks.

A note about corrections: It is important that we do not inadvertently correct a dog that is not doing anything wrong. If a person makes a loud noise (yelling, throwing objects, etc.) to discourage a dog from inappropriate behavior, it affects all dogs in the dog park area. This type of group punishment should not be used unless absolutely necessary (i.e., in the event of a fight).

Physical punishment of the dogs should be prohibited in the dog park. Rolling dogs on their back, grabbing them by the scruff of the neck, or pinning them while in the group (or anytime!) should not be used because this teaches the dogs to be wary of people. These methods also put you at a higher risk of being bitten because dogs will often defend themselves when being handled in this manner.

If a person becomes overly emotional or frustrated, then a timeout for the person(s) is in order. This will ensure the dogs are not being punished excessively or unfairly. Most punishment can be avoided by being proactive, and redirecting behavior as early as possible.

What to do when Dogs Fight:

1. If dogs get into a fight, attempt to break them up by either making a loud noise with your voice and a hand clap, or if you have something handy to grab, such as two metal bowls you can make a loud noise by hitting them together. Throwing blankets or towels over fighting dogs can startle them enough to make them stop fighting momentarily.
2. If none of those measures stop the fight you may need to physically intervene. This is very risky because dogs will often bite the person(s) during the fight. Always pull out the aggressor first. Stand behind the dog, grasping both back legs (closest to stomach), lift legs off the ground and back up. As soon as they are separated remove them from the park immediately. Check for injuries and treat as needed. Check all people who were involved in the break up of the fight for injuries as well.
3. Take into account several factors to determine whether or not a dog should be allowed to continue coming to the park. If the two dogs in the fight have been involved in numerous minor incidents in the past, then not being allowed to return to the park is the best option. If the two particular dogs in the fight just don't like each other, then maybe the owners can agree on coming to the park at different times/days. Depending on the seriousness of the injury inflicted will depend on whether the dog is able to continue to come to the park.