

First steps to playing it safe

By Michaela Greif, CPDT-KA and Leigh Siegfried, CPDT-KA

As dog parks have increased in popularity during the last two and a half decades, we dog owners/lovers/trainers have learned a tremendous amount about pet dog interactions in an enclosed environment. We thank you, Pooches. And on their behalf, here are some things you should know to help play it safe:

- 1. Be aware that not all dogs are dog-park dogs.** A dog park is like a crowded bar; some love the noise and social experience, while others would rather have coffee with a single friend, or go for a jog alone.
- 2. If dog parks aren't their thing, some other things to do with your pup:** Take a sniffing walk, explore trails, play ball; Get involved in dog sports and activities.
- 3. If dog parks are their thing, stay involved.** Would you take your 2-year-old to the playground and then ignore him/her while you read, talk on the phone, text, etc; responding only when someone starts to scream and cry? Hopefully not! Same applies here, folks.
- 4. DOG PARK PROS:** fun, exercise, social skills development and maintenance, learning, enrichment, and positive training experiences.
DOG PARK CONS: learned fear and aggression, social skills deterioration, a “Lord of the Flies” type scenario in which dogs handle things in a National Geographic style, Wild canid or a domesticated companion—you decide.
- 5. Beware of leashing dogs within dog park upon entrance/exit.** A leashed dog, surrounded by loose one is likely to feel more vulnerable and defensive.
- 6. Any dog can be an aggressor given the right circumstances.** It's your job to know your dog and be alert to problematic behaviors in the park.

Information courtesy of Opportunity Barks Behavior & Training

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Naughty and nice

By Michaela Greif, CPDT-KA and Leigh Siegfried, CPDT-KA

GOOD Greetings & Play

- Greetings characterized by butt sniffs, 'C' shaped approaches
- Loose, Wiggly Bodies and Wide Tail Wags (goofy and tiring)
- Play Bows
- Butt Bumps
- Vocalizations—growls, barks, snarls (if they are quick)
- Paw Offering & Pawing
- Mounting and Jumping (if brief and acceptable to both dogs)
- Brief, Fair and Harmless Disagreements (brief, fair and harmless are the keys here)

RUDE Greetings, Play & Bullying

- Face-to-Face, stiff-body greetings, chin resting on the shoulders between unknown dogs
- Vocalizations—if they are prolonged or higher-pitched (a dog might be scared, so intervene before other dogs may start to target them)
- One dog chases, pins, bites, etc. without trading roles or allowing rest
- Mob mentality: 2+ dogs on one
- Space Invading: crowding, cornering without mutual consent (see prev bullet: Mobs)
- Repeated Body Slamming

Rude Behaviors need an owner that can provide close supervision, pro-actively call their dogs out of play and give their dogs frequent breaks. Knowingly rude dogs need frequent interruption to keep arousal in check and may not be the best candidates for the dog park.

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How dogs calm and correct each other, and negotiate

By Michaela Greif, CPDT-KA and Leigh Siegfried, CPDT-KA

Dogs have an amazing array of subtle body language cues. Here are some of the things they do and what they are saying to each other (or you) when they do it.

How dogs diffuse tension or signal their non-threatening intentions:

- Shake Off • Ground Sniff • Belly Up • Look Away • Submissive Urination • Lying Down

How dogs demonstrate they are getting stressed out (subtle):

- Excessive panting (not weather- or exhaustion-related)
- Big eye (lots of whites of the eyes, dilated pupils)
- Freezing, cowering, muscle tension
- Apparent lack of interest in socializing
- Tail carriage (tucked under or high and tight)
- Lowered head, sudden sniffing (we joke it's the "I lost my contacts" move)
- Removing themselves from play, laying down near owners or equipment

How dogs teach and correct each other and say, "Hey, Cut it out!"

- Loud snarks • Quick & noisy lunge with/without mouth

WHEN YOU SHOULD INTERVENE:

Let it Go: If dog's correction to another dog is appropriate and the other dog got the message you'll know because the correction 1) ended the interaction immediately 2) happened infrequently, 3) and didn't cause the other dog's behavior to escalate.

Time to Intervene: If the dog(s) aren't "getting it" and behavior is escalating, intervene.

- **If you suspect bullying behavior,** separate both dogs for a time out and see if they choose to go back to each other.
- **If you own a dog that isn't likely to correct but the other dog is coming on too strong,** then move between your dog and that dog or ask an owner to intervene and take a long time out for the dog that was coming on too strong or pack it in.

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Signs that trouble is brewing and what to do

By Michaela Greif, CPDT-KA and Leigh Siegfried, CPDT-KA

If trouble is brewing, take the appropriate action: “Time Out” (TO) or “Time to Go”(TTG)

- Stiff Body, Long Stare, Face-to-Face/Nose-Nose [TO, TTG]
- Repeated Snarling, Snapping, Lunging [TO, TTG]
- Repeated Charging, Body-Slamming [TTG]
- Repeated Cornering, Pinning, One-Role Play [TTG]

Behavior translated

- Cowering, cringing, lips pulled back, wide, white eye = Fear [TTG]
- Freezing near (toy, food, person) w/ wide eye = Guarding [TO, TTG]
- Scanning, Bracing, Targeting, Bullying = Arousal [TTG]
- Scan-Freeze-Stalk-Point (non-play context) = Predation [TO, TTG]

Stay ahead of trouble. Be extra tuned-in to the following cases to make sure things stay safe:

- Size imbalance during play. Some larger dogs may fixate on smaller dogs making them feel threatened. A dog who fixates can be exhibiting predatory behavior and that shouldn't be allowed.
- Sound: High pitch is a sign a dog may be scared which can sometimes cause other dogs to target the dog with the high-pitched yelp or scream

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Signs of overstimulation and how to break up a fight

By Michaela Greif, CPDT-KA and Leigh Siegfried, CPDT-KA

Signs or Causes of Potential Overstimulation

- A dog is doing a lot of “Zoomies” or “Butt-on-Fire” runs
- Toys and treats can ramp up energy
- Lots of highly energized dogs (think happy hour) can ramp up energy
- Kids running around, skateboards, bikes zooming by can ramp up energy

The solution to potential overstimulation is frequent, pleasant interruptions to restore a bit of calm. Overstimulation can eventually lead to trouble if left unchecked.

The difference between a fight that will likely resolve on its own and one that requires intervention.

- 90% of what looks rough resolves on its own. Noise, teeth and quick resolution means the dogs worked it out but it's also a sign it's time for those dogs to pack it in.
- If it is a serious fight, you'll usually see any of the following and should intervene:
 - Back feet planted front feet up, boxing style, with snarling, loud growling and teeth showing. If these were humans, they'd be screaming at each other and punching.
 - One dog pinning another for a prolonged period. The pinned dog is distressed and being held captive by the pinner.
 - Mouth contact and repeated biting or sustained biting/gripping where one dog can't break free.

Should fight break out, here's what to do:

- Stay as calm as possible so as not to add more fuel to the fire. If your dog is not involved, secure your own dog so they don't join the fray. Then collect non-fighting dogs to prevent a mob.
- Create a loud or dramatic disruption (“Hey!”, clap, air horn, shake can, hose) to interrupt the dogs.
- Avoid putting your hands, face, etc. near dog mouths because redirection is common and you may become the target of a bite. Pulling attached dogs apart by their back legs wheelbarrow style is safer. But push forward before pulling back. This will often cause dogs to release their grip.
- After a fight, remove dogs immediately to a safe area away from park. Stress levels of a dog who has been in a fight may stay high for up to 3 days afterwards, so make your dog's life boring for several days and avoid the park during this time. Don't worry about getting them back in play ASAP to make up for a bad experience. Give them time to gear down.

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