

Dog Park Safety

Follow these practical tips for a positive day at the dog park.

Robin Whitsell

Emily Turner of North Carolina and her Irish Wolfhound Lagan loved their local dog park until a new owner brought her Dalmatian.

The newcomer dog “freaked out and attacked my dog,” Turner says. And when she stepped in to break up the fight, Turner was seriously bitten. Luckily, with quick and thorough medical care, Turner and Lagan were fine. “The staff at the emergency room did a very good job, but I still have an unattractive 2-inch scar on my right forearm.”

Turner’s story illustrates one of the challenges with dog parks: safety. While you may crave the opportunity to provide an environment with open spaces and potential friends for off-leash play, you also need to be aware of safety considerations.

Pick a park. When choosing a dog park, evaluate the location. Does it provide a double-gated entry to prevent dogs from escaping as a new friend enters? Is the fencing well-maintained without gaps or areas where dogs have dug under? Is there adequate shade and enough places for dogs to engage in play and take a break as well? How is waste managed? Are there bags and trash receptacles available?

All of these elements can either enhance or detract from the kind of experience you and your dog have.

Be observant. Perhaps more important than the park’s appearance are its visitors. It’s nice to have dogs of various sizes so that like-sized dogs can play. It’s also a good idea to look for an area where smaller dogs can play apart from the bigger ones. Though a dog park is an exciting environment, you don’t want to see out-of-control dogs or situations.

Also watch other dog owners carefully. If you see an aggressive dog who’s not being managed by her owner, play it safe and leave the park, recommends dog behaviorist Beverly Ulbrich.

Know your dog. Learn about your own dog’s behavior before entering a dog park. When you’re out walking, how does she react to other dogs and scents? Is her tail wagging or are her ears pushed back and her front quarters rigid? Though dogs will sometimes raise their hackles out of excitement and not aggression, a happily wagging tail should accompany this body language — not growling or intense staring. If your dog behaves fearfully or aggressively around other dogs, a dog park may not be a good environment for her.

Ulbrich recommends that your dog know the Off, Drop it, and Come commands, so if a situation arises, she will come to you.

Dog parks provide a fantastic opportunity for off-leash play when owners are alert and conscientious. Few things can happily tire out your dog like a fellow canine playmate.

With a few precautions, your dog can play, play, play at the dog park with the only telltale signs being a sleepy, and probably dirty, dog.

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