

Are Dog Parks Safe?

Help your dog play it safe at the dog park by following these guidelines.

Maureen Kochan

In January 2008, Shiloh, a 10-pound Pomeranian-Maltese mix, was attacked by a Greyhound and almost killed while leaving Great Bark Dog Park in Colorado. Shiloh, owned by Amie S., escaped with only a large gash thanks to a passing good Samaritan who shielded the small dog with his body.

Common? No. But the thought of a dog getting hurt – or worse – can be scary for owners who enjoy taking their dogs to the dog park. Despite a few headline-making tragedies, the good news is you can help your dog play it safe at the dog park by following these important guidelines:

Visit the dog park for the first time without your dog. Are the dog park's rules posted in a prominent spot? Do visitors follow them (pick up poop promptly, watch their dogs closely, don't allow young children in the park, etc.)? Do the grounds look well-tended? Are there separate enclosures for small and large dogs?

Make sure your dog is dog-park ready. Is he social and confident – but not aggressive – around other dogs and people? Is he physically fit and healthy? Does he respond to basic commands like Come, Stay, and Sit?

Watch the dog park a few minutes before entering with your dog. Are the dogs playing nicely? Is there a comfortable ratio of about two dogs for everyone one person? If even one dog appears to be acting aggressively or the park feels crowded, come back later.

Be prepared for doggie skirmishes. "Sure, there are tussles," says Barbara Windgassen, president of Anthem Pets, the nonprofit group that lobbied for and built Jackass Acres K-9 Korral dog park in Arizona, DOG FANCY's 2008 Best Dog Park. "Not all dogs like each other. But the problems are not serious, and it's usually just rough play and the owners distract them," she says.

Intervene during a dogfight at your own risk. Your dog could bite even you without realizing it if he's engrossed in a fight. At Jackass Acres K-9 Korral, children's bike horns are stationed around the park for owners to blow if play turns raucous, and park regulars often carry whistles. "Most dogs have the attention span of about 10 seconds, and will forget why they were playing with that dog and quit when they hear the noise," Windgassen says.

Police the park – politely. It's up to park visitors to make sure everyone follows the rules. "People should not be afraid to ask an owner to come back another time or control their dog if there are problems," Windgassen says.

Get involved. Join the dog park's association, help out during clean-up days, or donate money to keep the park in tip-top shape. Windgassen attributes Jackass Acres K-9 Korral's success – and its safety record – to their great group of dogs and people. "Everyone takes such pride in our park," she says.

Maureen Kochan is a DOG FANCY contributing editor.

For more information about America's best dog parks, check out the June 2008 issue of DOG FANCY.

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