



Dog Park Guidelines

Although it is sometimes hard to tell when you should intercede—and when you should not—here are some general guidelines.

Note: Always, always watch your dog and stay close by. Things can go wrong in a fraction of a second, and you need to be close to your dog to be able to supervise appropriately.

Signs of Trouble—Times to Intercede on Behalf of Your Dog or Others'

- ★ **When a dog is trying to run away from one or more dogs chasing it.** You can usually tell when the dog is not having fun by watching its tail (tucked or drooping) and its face (eyes darting, mouth closed instead of big, sloppy tongue-flapping grin).
- ★ **When a dog is hiding behind someone or under a table or chair,** and is acting like any cornered animal would, e.g., protecting its rear and huddling down as much as he can. This sometimes includes snarling, snapping, and/or growling to keep other dogs away. If this dog does this a lot, the dog park experience may be too much for him, and may cause him to learn to be aggressive with other dogs in other situations besides the dog park.
- ★ **When several dogs start chasing one dog.** This does not always result in a problem, but can quickly change from a fun game of tag to the chasee feeling vulnerable and scared, and the chasing pack turning into an ugly mob. Monitor these kinds of games closely.
- ★ **When the volume of barking or vocalizing increases in intensity and loudness.** This is often a signal that play is getting out of control. It is best to intercede and redirect them, let them cool down, and then start playing again.
- ★ **When one dog is bullying or humping another.** Bullying is the intense, non-stop harassment of a dog. Do not let your dog learn to bully or hump other dogs. Intercede, redirect, or even give your dog a timeout for this behavior.
- ★ **When the size differential between two dogs is great.** When a very large dog and a very small dog play together, the play can change when something called “predatory drift” happens. This is when the small dog yips, squeals, or darts too quickly, and the larger dog’s brain switches from seeing the dog as a playmate to seeing the dog as something to be chased and killed. This is one of the reasons many dog parks have a small dog area separate from the large dog area.
- ★ **Whenever a dog is feeling intimidated.** A common misunderstanding about socialization is that dogs need to “just deal with it” when another dog intimidates it. The problem occurs when the intimidation causes a dog to be so fearful that s/he “generalizes” that fear to all dogs.

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Signs of Appropriate Interaction—Times NOT to Intercede on Behalf of Your Dog or Others'

Note: When in doubt, intercede; however, it is common for people to misinterpret some elements of normal, canine communication and to mistakenly interrupt brief squabbles that happen from time to time.

- ★ **When a dog who does not want to play “reprimands” another.** Not all dogs want to play with every other dog or to play with certain dogs (who may be too big, too rough, etc.). Signs that dogs use to tell other dogs that they don't want to interact include:
 - a. ignoring the other dog, acting as if the other dog isn't there
 - b. turning away from the other dog
 - c. averting eye contact
 - d. moving very slowly
 - e. freezing (the first warning stage): stiff body stance, holds its breath
 - f. “whale eye,” a *very brief*, hard, cold glance
 - g. low growl
 - h. snarl (lifting of the lips)
 - i. air snap (this is a warning; if he wanted to bite, he would have)
 - j. lunge and air snap (may or not be accompanied with bark or growl)
 - k. snap with contact (can result in a pinch, a bruising bite, or puncture)

These are all normal and appropriate canine communication signals. What is NOT appropriate is for us to punish a dog for trying to use these signals to tell another dog to back off. What IS appropriate is for us to **intercede and redirect the dog who is not responding to these signals. Punishing the dog for signaling can result in a dog who learns not to signal at all before he bites.**

- ★ **When dogs who are playing appropriately get into a “squabble.”** A brief (five seconds) squabble is normal among hard-playing friends. Stay close by, let them know you are there (“Easy, you guys!”), and be ready to intercede if it gets out of control. Breaking up normal play and squabbles too early, however, can remove an important part of learning how to resolve differences *without* escalating to a fight.

Dog park expert Sue Sternberg's dog park app: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/dog-park-assistant/id566034379?mt=8>. Photos and videos of low- to high-risk behaviors.

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