



Dog Parks: Fun or Frightening?

What to expect in your “day at the park”

By Barbara Kahn

I never thought you’d catch me taking my dogs to a dog park. I own sighthounds that love to chase and be chased but wrestling, body slamming and hip-checking are enjoyable for breeds more robust than mine.

Then the fields where I previously ran my dogs in solitude became unavailable and I debated what to do. I tried a local dog park with much trepidation having heard nightmare stories of the goings on. And, after several enjoyable weeks of daily runs at off hours there, it happened. A major incident occurred and, though there were no serious physical consequences, the emotional repercussions are yet to be assessed. This dog park is now off limits for me and my guys. Since this frightening episode, many other people have come forward to share with me horrific experiences of their own.

So are they wonderful or awful? The answer is a resounding YES! Dog parks can be both wonderful and awful depending on the layout of the area itself, whether or not the parks are supervised, and the nature of the dogs and owners who frequent them.

The wonderful part of dog parks is that our pets can run freely and play with one another, get sufficient exercise and have an enriched life. Owners can meet like-minded people and enjoy social exchanges. And nothing beats watching our pets having fun!





The awful part comes in when the parks are poorly designed and unsafe; when people are unaware of or don't understand how dogs play and what aggression looks like; when owners are inconsiderate or worse yet, deliberately allow their dogs to behave in socially unacceptable ways; when owners are negligent about paying strict and unrelenting attention to their dogs, cleaning up after them and making sure everyone using the park can do so safely.

So, up on my soapbox I go to offer suggestions for how all of us who would consider frequenting a dog park might improve the whole dog park situation.

Dog Park Design

There should be several entrances and dogs should not be allowed to congregate at entries, intimidating other dogs that arrive.

In addition to a play yard for dogs that like to wrestle, there should be trails where owners can walk their dogs and avoid rough play if they so desire.

Children:

Leave little ones home. Children who are lifted, carried, scream, squeal, run, fall, chase and play with toys are targets, even for reasonably well-behaved dogs.

Supervision/evaluation:

First and foremost, dogs that are afraid of, not used to or simply don't like company of other dogs, don't belong in the rough & ready area of the dog park. This is a highly dynamic and volatile social environment where dogs interact with one another.





Dogs that are extremely predatory and want to chase with a vengeance and take out another animal should be exercised in some other fashion. Owners **MUST** have command control over their dogs. If the dogs cannot come when called and leave things when told, they shouldn't be allowed off leash in a dog park.

Personal Responsibility:

- ❖ **Stay aware of your dog(s).** Socializing is fun but you must know where your dog is and what it is doing at all times.
- ❖ **Learn to recognize the signs of aggression:** posturing, staring, stalking and the like. Precursors of aggression are significant since it is much easier to stop a dog from aggressing before an attack becomes full-blown.
- ❖ Instead of huddling in a group as the dogs pummel one another, **keep walking.** It's better exercise for you and puts your dog in less risk of having play escalate and get out of control.
- ❖ If you bring toys or food into the park, **prepare to be accosted** by many dogs. Throwing a toy or ball for your dog does not guarantee that your dog will possess it in the end. Dogs can be very competitive and protective of toys and may fight over a gooey, yucky, drooly tennis ball.
- ❖ If your dog is a bully but not really dangerous, **put a light muzzle on it** so it can run and play but not injure anyone.
- ❖ **Do NOT walk your dog on leash** in an off-leash dog park. Your dog may feel extremely threatened and defensively attack dogs that approach when it feels the leash prevents it from getting away. If you can't trust your dog off-leash, do some further training before taking the dog to an off leash facility.
- ❖ **Do NOT use electronic (shock,stim, remote) collars** at the dog park. A dog getting a shock may scream, attracting other dogs to attack it.





- ❖ **Make sure your dogs are wearing ID tags on a plain buckle collar.** Choke or pinch collars can get caught and strangle a dog if it is wrestling or roughhousing with another dog.
- ❖ **Stay alert.** Save your cell phone conversations for AFTER your dog park experience is over.
- ❖ **Small, young and/or timid dogs can suffer physical and emotional trauma** that may last for life, so unless there is a specific area set aside for them, exercise them in some other way. Tiny dogs look like prey to larger, more assertive animals. Don't take the chance. It's just not worth it.
- ❖ **Clean up after your dogs.** Otherwise you run the risk of everyone losing the privilege of having a dog park. That means filling in holes your dog may have dug so animals and people don't sustain injuries tripping over them.
- ❖ **Don't use the off leash dog park area to run, ride a bike, fly a kite, have a picnic.** Dogs will be dogs and they will chase whatever moves and eat whatever they can steal.
- ❖ Just because a dog approaches you, **don't feel obligated to pet it.** Some dogs, especially when aroused, may be intolerant of being touched.
- ❖ **Bring water for your dog** if none is available in the dog park.

Constantly screaming at your dog to come or behave itself generally has two effects.

1. It desensitizes your dog to the importance of listening to your voice. After all, why listen when the voice is incessantly unpleasant, intrusive and demanding?
2. It annoys the heck out of everyone else who's trying to have a pleasant experience.





So now it's time to voice your opinion: Email me at barb@wonderdogs.com with the subject line "BCW-Dog Parks" or drop me a note at WonderDogs, 424D Kelly Drive, W. Berlin, NJ 08091 with answers to the following questions:

- ❖ Which dog parks have you frequented?
- ❖ Which one(s) did you like best?
- ❖ Why?
- ❖ What problems have you experienced, if any?
- ❖ What suggestions do you have for improvement?
- ❖ Would you be interested in a private/supervised dog park that requires membership and where dogs must be evaluated by experts before being allowed in?
- ❖ How do you exercise your dog if not in dog park?
- ❖ If you've never taken your dog to an off leash dog park, why not?

