

Following Dog Parks' Rules of Engagement

Education and peer pressure can keep both species safe

It only takes one bad apple to spoil a dog park for others. The best dog parks are those whose users band together to create a sense of community, who use education, peer pressure and, when necessary, call the appropriate authorities to help regulate those who don't follow the rules of etiquette and common sense.

Rules for dog park safety generally fall into three categories: Appropriate Dog Behavior, Appropriate Human Behavior and Rules of Engagement – what to do when someone does not follow the rules.

Appropriate Dog Behavior

Taking your dog to either a fenced dog park or allowing them to run off-leash on trails, is not recommended for dogs with serious behavior problems with other dogs or humans. Dogs with "issues" should be carefully socialized in environments that are far more controlled than a dog park. They may never be dog park candidates, even with behavior modification. Consider the following before taking your dog into a park to exercise off-leash.

- *Dogs should be friendly and outgoing*, not overbearing, obnoxious or bullying.
- *Your dog should be reasonably confident and social* – not fearful, aggressive or reactive.
- *Your dog should not body-slam, mount or mark (leg-lift) humans in the park*, nor should he jump into the laps at random, sitting humans without invitation.
- *Your dog should be responsive to basic cues* – at least "Come" when called, "Sit" and "Leave it/Off", so you can control him when necessary.
- *Barking should be kept to a reasonable level*, both for the comfort of other park users as well as nearby neighbors.
- *Only healthy dogs should visit dog parks*. Communicable diseases and parasites are unacceptable. These can affect and infect other dogs – and sometimes humans. Pain-causing structural unsoundnesses – hip dysplasia, arthritis, etc. – are a high risk factor for causing aggression when a dog is hurt or anticipates being hurt.

Appropriate Human Behavior

We play an important role in making sure we and our dogs follow the rules.

- *Visit the park without your dog at least once to observe park culture and practices.* Take your dog to the park for the first time during non-peak use hours to allow you to acquaint yourselves with the environment without the stress of multiple dogs.
- *Obey all posted park rules, even if you disagree with them.*
- *Consult with your veterinarian about your dog's overall condition* before taking him to the park and remember that your dog must be fully vaccinated.
- *Be realistic about your dog's potential as a park playmate.* The dog park is not the appropriate place to work on fixing your dog's behavior problems.
- *Watch play for several minutes before taking your dog in* to be sure no dogs are present who could present a danger to him.
- *Remove your dog's leash as soon as you enter the off-leash area.* Mixing on-leash and off-leash dogs can cause stress, which may lead to aggression.
- *Supervise your dog's play at all times.* Interrupt inappropriate play – no matter whether your dog is the perpetrator of the victim.
- *Apologize if your dog has behaved inappropriately and leave if your dog is too rough or not having a good time.* Be polite, even if someone else's dog misbehaves and the owner isn't controlling his dog.
- *Remember, not all dogs enjoy playing with others.* Some enjoy a small circle of intimate friends, but aren't keen on the park scene. Some enjoy park play as youngsters, but less so as they mature. If you love going to the dog park, but your dog doesn't, go without him and socialize with other dog owners, sans Fido.
- *Avoid disciplining another person's dog.* If you must use force to break up a fight – so be it. However, be prepared for the worst. Bring an ultrasound device or citronella spray/doggie Mace facsimile in the event of an emergency.

If you find another dog's behavior unacceptable, leave the park or discuss the problem with the dog's owner rather than "correcting" him.

- *Honor posted dog park hours.* They are set for a reason.
- *Clean up after your dog religiously.* Be willing to clean up unclaimed piles of waste from visitors who don't know or don't follow the rules of dog park etiquette or perhaps just didn't notice their dog leaving a fecal souvenir.

Rules of Engagement

If a human or his dog behave inappropriately, assume they don't know any better and do your best to educate gently, politely and respectfully. If you're uncomfortable doing so, seek the help of another park user for support. Don't wimp out. As a responsible dog park user, you have an obligation to report inappropriate actions of other park users that put the safety of dogs and humans at risk.

If inappropriate actions are putting you or your dog at risk and the other dog owner isn't receptive to education, take your dog and leave the park. Contact your local police department to report the incident. If you don't know the dog owner's name, contact information, or permit number, try to get his license plate number. If that's not possible, write down a detailed description of both dog and human, noting any times you've seen them at the park to help the authorities make contact. Also write a detailed and unemotional description of the behaviors you believe were inappropriate.

Incident involving bodily injury, aggression, etc. to persons or dogs should be immediately reported to the Lower Merion Police by calling 911. The Police investigation and report is necessary for any needed follow-up, including the suspension of Park privileges, either temporarily or permanently.

Park patrons should feel free to direct any questions or concerns to the Parks and Recreation Office at 610-645-6220 or email recreation@lowermerion.org.

A positive approach generally works better with humans, as it does with dogs.

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