

■ **Take off the leash.**

What's the point of going to the dog park if you're going to put a leash on your dog? If you've done the recommended training, checked out the safety and design of the park, and observed the other dogs before entering, you've done what you can to give your dog a fun and safe experience. Leashes interfere with the natural body language of the dog, dogs can get tangled up in them and dogs who become stressed by constant pulling against a leash can act in undesirable ways. Besides, most parks require that your dog be off-leash.

■ **Small dogs need special consideration.**

Try to find a dog park with a small dog section, or specific small-dog playtimes. It's so easy for a little guy to get overwhelmed—not to mention bowled over—by larger dogs. Keep your small dog on the ground rather than toting him around with you in the park. Being elevated can either give a dog a false sense of control because of the elevated position and close human backup, or entice other dogs to jump up at the dog being held to get a closer sniff.

■ **Stay only as long as your dog is having fun.**

Visits to the dog park need to be fluid. If your dog isn't enjoying the experience, or other dogs are getting out of control, you need to leave, whether or not you're ready to go. On the other hand, if your dog is having a spectacularly good time, you might want to stay a little longer.



DOG PARK TIPS

BY CHERYL S. SMITH

Teaching your dog key skills so that he will have a good dog park experience is important. At a minimum, be sure that you can call your dog to you and ask him to settle down. You will feel (and be) more in control of a visit to the park. But what about you? Here's a rundown of things to remember when using the park.

■ **Be vigilant.** Keep your focus on your dog no matter how enjoyable your human companions are. Don't allow yourself to be part of stationary human clumps, because that will result in too many dogs gathering in one place. It is the humans' responsibility to keep the park a safe and fun experience.

■ **Stay calm, talk quietly.** Loud (and probably ineffective) commands as well as boisterous human chatter can raise the excite-

ment level in the whole park and risk inciting some sort of bad behavior.

■ **Provide your dog with many different forms of entertainment.** If visiting the park is the only exciting event in your dog's life, he's likely to be overexcited upon arrival.

■ **Save treats (and toys) for later.** There's just too much potential for dogs to engage in guarding

or stealing behavior that can lead to aggression and fights.

■ **Stay connected with your dog at the dog park.**

Not via a leash, but through a mental connection. Call your dog to you from time to time. Play a quick game, or just give him a scratch and send him back to play.

■ **Talk to friends.** Just do it in small groups, and preferably while you're walking rather than sitting.

■ **Watch the dogs.** You will not only learn lots about canine body language, you will also learn lessons about how to relax and have a good time.

■ **Always pick up after your dog,** and insist that others do the same. Pick up the occasional extra pile, if needed.

■ **Relax and enjoy the experience.** If for some reason you can't relax—if you're too concerned about your dog's behavior, say—then you shouldn't be there. Take some dog training classes to get better behavior, then try the park again.

■ **Leave if you start to feel concerned about anything going on.**

Help to resolve the situation if you can, but your first responsibility is to keep your dog safe.

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