

Is Your Dog a Good Candidate for the Dog Park?

Generally, a dog park can be a wonderful place to allow your dog to play and explore off-leash in a safe environment. Once you have established a few important things below, you will be ready to begin socializing your dog to the environment at the dog park:

- Your dog has all the appropriate immunizations. Rabies vaccinations are required at Saddlebrooke Dog Park. Check with your veterinarian regarding other immunizations.
- Your dog is usually friendly around other animals. If your dog is shy, reactive, or hasn't been around other dogs, you should consider a less overwhelming environment like a training class *before* checking out the dog park.
- You are prepared to supervise and interact with your dog at all times while at the park. The dog park is the place to be focused on your dog, not texting on your cell phone or visiting with other owners.
- Your dog has a good recall (comes when called). A good recall is not just at home, so practice this before heading out anywhere your dog will be off-leash.

What is socialization and why is it important?

You've determined that your dog is a good candidate for the dog park, and you're prepared to be an active dog park parent. Great! Now let's define socialization.

Socialization is introducing your dog to novel environments, experiences, objects and others (be it dogs, men, women, children) AND making the introductions enjoyable and as stress free as possible so that your dog develops good associations.

We often think of socialization for puppies, as it is very important to their development into normal adult dogs. Well-socialized puppies develop far fewer behavior issues. Adult dogs can be socialized to new things using the same process.

The important part is to keep the introductions slow, and ensure your dog is enjoying the experience. If your dog begins to show signs of stress, anxiety, fear or reactivity, then you need to slow down, pull back, and return to an earlier point in the introduction.

The dog park environment

The dog park is not just one thing. It is a new environment filled with new dogs, people, objects, smells, sounds and experiences. The best thing you can do for your dog is to scope out the dog park before bringing your dog along. Check the park out at the times you are most likely to go.

Some things to check out first:

- Are the dog owners supervising and interacting with their pets? If they are spending more time chatting with each other and texting, they are not going to be able to control their dogs if play gets too rambunctious. They should be monitoring their dogs at all times.

- Do all the dogs rush the gate when a new dog is entering? Dog owners must ensure their dogs stay clear so others can enter safely. Saddlebrooke Dog Park rules prohibit crowding the gate, as many dog fights begin there.
- Does the dog play look friendly? Dogs who are playing are loose, wiggly and bouncy.

Once you're ready to introduce your dog to the dog park, plan a short first trip. You may not even go inside the park the first time. Pick a time when the park is not too busy. Late mornings and early afternoons are usually uncrowded times at Saddlebrooke Dog Park.

Start by walking your dog on-leash outside the park and letting him check out all the sights, sounds and smells. If he approaches the fence calmly and looks happy to be there, feed him some treats. (However, we strongly discourage taking a bunch of treats into the park, as some dogs may mob you or display guarding behavior around the treats.)

Practice a few behaviors, like sit or down. Practice approaching the gate calmly. If it is going well, take your dog in for quick off-leash lap around the inside of the park. Walk around with your dog. Talk to him, play and have fun. The dog park should always be fun for you and more importantly, your dog. If at any time your dog seems uncomfortable in the park or with any of the dogs or people, you should leave.

Even if it is going well, keep this first visit short; no more than 20 minutes. Next time you can plan to stay a little longer if your dog is enjoying himself.

As your dog interacts with the other dogs at the park, pay close attention to the dogs he enjoys playing with and which ones he ignores, or runs away from. Just like we don't like everyone we meet, your dog won't like every dog he meets. Introduce yourself to the owners of the dogs your dog likes to engage with and find out when they visit the park. It's a great way to ensure your dog has a good time and makes some new friends.

Every time you visit the dog park, do a quick check before you go in the gate. Note any dogs, people, objects and sounds that may be new to your dog. Each trip will have a different set of variables and may present a socialization opportunity. Keep each interaction positive for your dog. Be prepared to leave or stay away from some dogs if the situation is uncomfortable for your dog. With proper socialization, your dog should become happy to play at the park with other well socialized dogs. That doesn't mean he will get along with every dog, especially if the other dog doesn't have the best doggie manners. Not every dog enjoys the dog park, and that's OK.

While it's great to practice some basic behaviors at the dog park, away from other dogs, and this can help build your dog's confidence, I don't recommend training new behaviors in the midst of all the other dogs. Asking your dog to sit and stay while all the other dogs are sniffing his butt and in his face can be overwhelming and scary for any dog. If you need to get in some off-leash training, head to the park mid-day and do it while the park is uncrowded. So, take it slow, observe your dog's comfort level, and have fun!

Can You Read Your Dog's Body Language?

The dog park is a great place to socialize your dog. In addition to having fun legally running off leash, your dog will surely meet other canines at the dog park. Like humans, every dog has a different personality. Some are more energetic, loving to romp around and play, while other dogs may be shy or prefer to stick close by their owners. Dogs will tell you how they're feeling through their body language.

Learning to understand their signs will help you determine your dog's needs, as well as predict how other dogs you encounter will behave. Dogs use nonverbal communication to let you know if they're friendly or to be avoided. Observing a dog's face, eyes, mouth, tail, ears, and posture can tell you a lot about a dog's feelings. While most dog park visitors are friendly and sociable, recognizing a dog's body language will increase your enjoyment and safety when interacting with dogs.

The overall demeanor of a dog can be observed by the way he approaches another dog. Most dogs will greet one another face to face and then instantly sniff each other's butts (there's just no nice way to say it!). Scent is an instinctual part of a dog's makeup, so it is perfectly natural for them to behave this way.

Once this sniff session is over, some dogs will want to play, as demonstrated by lowering their upper body and slightly spreading their front legs in front of a playmate. Typically, when both dogs want to play, they will romp and run around like this together, often chasing each other and running in fast circles around their owners.

Playful and normal actions:

- Back and forth play – dogs change position – role reversals
- Bouncy, exaggerated gestures
- Wiggly bodies
- Open relaxed mouth
- Play-bows
- Twisted leaps or jumps
- Pawing the air
- Butt sniffing and loose tail and body language
- Wide, circular tail wagging
- Butt bumps
- Playful vocalization
- Brief, fair, and harmless disagreements or corrections

Signs of anxiety/stress to monitor:

- Whining or whimpering
- Ears may be back
- Hiding behind objects or people
- Averting eye contact
- Lip-licking, yawning

- Submissive urination
- Going belly up
- Tail between the legs

There are times when a dog will correct another dog for something he deems inappropriate. This is totally normal, nonaggressive, and is actually good for teaching young dogs important lessons about canine social structure and body language. Healthy correcting by one dog to another is done by:

- Loud woofs or snarks directed at another dog
- Normally done once and the argument is over

Appropriate corrections that are ignored by the other dog may escalate in severity but result in no harm being done to the dog being corrected. However, if your dog is over-correcting, or if your dog is ignoring appropriate corrections by another dog, it is time to give a time out to your dog.

An *aggressive* dog will often approach another dog quickly, head forward and neck raised with intense “staring” eyes. The hair on its back may be raised. A dog who lifts his lip and shows his teeth to the extent his muzzle is wrinkled is signaling they are about to bite. Call your dog to you and steer clear from a dog exhibiting these behaviors.

And, finally:

Think of your trip to the dog park as going to a doggy cocktail party. If your dog knows the other dogs, he will feel comfortable and relaxed as he mingles with his friends. However, if he doesn't know the other dogs, then you need to help him break the ice. The more you observe your dog and others, the more familiar you'll be at knowing what they're feeling. Keeping an eye on your dog and observing his interactions at all times is important to ensure the optimum safety and enjoyment of all dog park visitors.

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Sources:

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Association of Professional Dog Trainers

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