



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

# Should I Take My Dog to the Dog Park?

### Dog park pros

- A secure place to let your dog exercise off leash
- A place where your dog can interact and play with other dogs
- A place where people can be social with other dog owners and discuss dog related issues

### Dog park cons

- Interactions and play between dogs can be inappropriate causing scuffles and fights
- Dogs can practice and learn inappropriate play
- Dogs can learn to be fearful of other dogs
- Dogs can practice and learn to be too boisterous or be a bully with other dogs



### If you take your dog to an off leash area

#### Do:

- Make sure you are responsible for your dog
- Supervise your dog at all times
- Remove your dog if they are being inappropriate with other dogs or people
- Make sure your dog obeys basic commands such as come when called and sit
- Learn to recognise dog body language
- Learn about appropriate canine play styles and only allow your dog to play with other dogs who match that play style
- Be aware that your dog's behaviour can change within seconds
- Be aware that your dog's toys (ball or disc for example) or food treats may excite other dogs
- Make sure your dog is up to date with all their vaccinations
- Pick up after your dog

#### Don't:

- Allow your dog to be inappropriate with other dogs or people
- Allow your dog to start fights
- Take your dog to the dog park if they constantly get into fights or bully other dogs.
- Assume your dog is having a good time. Learn to read your dog's body language. Not all dogs enjoy interacting with other dogs.
- Allow your dog to rush up to other dogs entering the park



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- Take children to play in off leash areas, there are parks designed for this purpose. Children should be taught to interact safely and appropriately with all dogs in off leash areas (refer to our kid and dogs info sheet).
- Take your dog to the dog park if she is in season (in heat).

### Here are some common questions we get asked:

**My dog doesn't really like other dogs; will taking him to the dog park improve his sociability?**  
Not necessarily. If your dog is scared of other dogs, taking him to the dog park is likely to increase his anxiety and fear, especially if the other dogs are overly boisterous. To put this in a human scenario, imagine that you are scared of spiders and someone took you into a room FULL of spiders (all over the walls and on the floor!). This would NOT help you overcome your fear. This is a technique called "flooding" and is not recommended for fear based behaviours.

The best option is to take your dog to an area outside the dog park at a distance where your dog can be calm. Allow your dog to watch the other dogs at a distance and reward him for being calm with food or a toy. Then slowly decrease your distance from the dog park as your dog gets used to the other dogs. He may be able to meet other calm dogs through the fence eventually and even interact with them at some point provided you take it nice and slowly. For more information, refer to "lead reactive dogs" and "training dogs to overcome their fears" info sheets.

### I want my puppy to be socialised, at what age should I take her to the dog park?

Be careful here. Firstly, make sure your puppy is FULLY vaccinated before taking her to a dog park. There is a huge risk of an unvaccinated puppy picking up dangerous diseases in areas where unknown dogs frequent.

Secondly, socialisation for your puppy is not all about playing with other dogs. Your puppy needs to experience lots of different environments, meet many people, and learn to cope with noises and fast moving objects as well as meeting other dogs. Refer to our "socialisation checklist" for more information.

Thirdly, a young puppy at a dog park can't always cope with older more confident dogs, even if they are trying to play. On the other hand, many dogs find young puppies extremely annoying and can often 'tell them off'. While this is ok to a certain extent, it is far more likely that your puppy will either learn that other dogs are scary, or, if they are allowed to practice this behaviour repeatedly, they may learn to be a bully. Follow the rules on page one and be your puppy's advocate. Ensure you pick your puppy's play pals carefully. A great way to do this is to enrol in a positive reinforcement K9 Kindergarten or play group where experienced trainers can teach you and your puppy about appropriate play and how to read your puppy's body language. For more info refer to our "my dog wants to say hi", "does my dog want to play" info sheets.

### In conclusion

Dog parks can be great places to take your dog for physical exercise and social enrichment with other people and dogs. However, please be careful and ensure you are your dog's advocate at all times.



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### References and Further Reading

Association of Pet Dog Trainers (2012) Dog Park Etiquette

<https://apdt.com/resource-center/dog-park-etiquette/>

King, Trish & Long, Terry (2004) Dog Parks: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

<https://apdt.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/dog-parks-goodbadugly.pdf>

Smith, Cheryl S (2007) Visiting the Dog Park, Having Fun, Staying Safe, Dogwise Publishing

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