

Mind Your Manners and Your Pet At The Dog Park

By Alison Deeb, Guest Columnist

As a dog park advocate, I hear everything positive and negative when it comes to the dog park. “It really bothers me when people don’t pick up,” they shout. “Can I bring my 12 year old Keeshond? He doesn’t like other dogs but needs the exercise,” they say mildly. Or, “They’re just dogs! They’re only playing.”

As off-leash dog parks become more popular, it is becoming more critical to teach good manners. Manners include both our canine friends themselves and their human companions. What is good dog park etiquette? Here are some tips for using dog parks so that you and your dog can make friends and not enemies!

Supervision is key to a safe and healthy dog run experience. MARDOG sponsors monthly “Maintenance Days” where volunteers greet visitors at the park and gently remind people to clean up after their dogs. We serve refreshments outside the park educating others not to bring food inside the park. But how do you teach and encourage good dog park etiquette to everyone ALL the time in an unsupervised arena?

MARDOG’s governing philosophy has always been that positive behavior elicits positive results. If people see others picking up, then others will soon follow. These good dog people help to ensure the park’s overall health, safety and enjoyment. There are nice ways to remind someone to pick up such as “Do you need a bag?” or “Excuse me, is that your standard poodle over there in the woods? Do you know who the owner is?”

Role models and positive behaviors need to be established from the outset. As soon as a park is established, formal rules need to be in place and signage needs to be posted. A volunteer and education program in conjunction with the dog park helps to ensure safety and enjoyment. You want the park and its users to get off on the right paw!

Basic obedience is essential for your dog’s mental health as well as his social development. At the park, it could save his or her life. “When your dog comes back to you, this is a good thing,” says Pia Sylvani, Director of Training and Behavior at St. Hubert’s Animal Welfare Center in Madison, New Jersey. “Reward this. Your dog is showing loyalty and attention to you amidst all the distractions and excitement in the dog park.”

Teach and reinforce basic obedience commands such as “Sit,” “Stay,” and “Come.” Teach your dog his name and reinforce this on a daily basis. Practice at the park. It is a terrific opportunity to teach good manners and brush up on some basic skills so that Buster masters basic commands.

At the dog park, standard greetings are oftentimes muddled by the dynamics of all the dogs in the run. It becomes difficult to ascertain who is engaging who, or who is avoiding who. On-leash greetings are controlled. You can understand when Buster greets Fido and sniff from head-to-head or head-to-rear or circle what each is doing. But, what do you do when five dogs charge the double-gate and greet your timid and shy Brittany mix?

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When you enter the park, it is important to unleash your dog inside the double-gate and then enter the park quickly. On the other hand, it is also important to not hover near the entry gate so as to scare a dog trying to enter.

There is the story about a Boston Terrier who was stalked by a 150 pound Bull Mastiff. The Mastiff came barreling into the run after the Boston Terrier owner had been there first. There was no mention about taking turns, asking politely about compatibility, etc. The person didn't even say, "Hello, I'm coming in." There was no warning at all. Residents at a public dog run should generally take turns especially if dogs are not compatible. Size, as we discussed in my last column, is definitely a compatibility issue.

Some people can't be bothered about picking up after their dog. They are in a hurry and oftentimes you see them on their cell phones or looking at their watch. One lady came into the run a month ago and asked me "You clean up, right?" I said politely, "No, you must supervise your dog and pick up after him." She smiled and said, "Oh. I thought the dog park was supposed to do that?" I responded politely but gritting my teeth, "No. It is your responsibility." Meanwhile, I thought to myself, "Where the heck did she get that idea? If there is a dog park like that around, I want to join up! Now that is a good marketing benefit!"

What is considered to be good dog park etiquette? According to experts, there are a few basic rules that dog park users need to be aware of:

- ❖ **SUPERVISE.** Supervise your dog at all times. Know what they are doing and with whom. Even if you know your dog would never fight, you never know what his "friends" might do.
- ❖ **CLEAN UP.** No matter what you do, clean up immediately after your dog has defecated. Grab a bag on your way in and you will be prepared for whatever happens. It's a good rule of thumb to follow your dog around during the first few minutes. Chances are Fido is likely to relieve himself in the first ten minutes.
- ❖ **WATER.** Experts disagree on whether a public water fountain should be made available for dogs so it is a good idea to bring your own water. Water-borne illnesses such as giardia can be transmitted so it is a good idea to give Fido a break and go outside for a drink in his own bowl.
- ❖ **CARRY LEASH.** Unleash your dog in the double-gated entry but carry your leash with you at all times while inside the park. This way, you can leash up if you need to and get out in a hurry.
- ❖ **READ.** Understand park rules before you enter. Rules were established to protect you and your dog so read and understand them before you enter the park. Report injuries to the proper authorities. Program the number into your cell phone.
- ❖ **DO NOT CARRY YOUR SMALL DOG.** Picking up your dog elevates your dog status. This is one of the leading causes of how dogs and their owners become injured. If there is no small dog area, use extra care when bringing Fido to the run.

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- ❖ **DOGGY STYLES.** Not all people get along so how do we expect all dogs to get along? Make sure that dogs are appropriate playmates in terms of size, sex, personality and play style. Sooner or later, you'll meet a dog yours doesn't like. Smile, call your dog and explore another corner of the park.
- ❖ **DRESS.** Wear comfortable clothing and shoes.
- ❖ **SURFACE.** On hard surfaces, use booties in cold or hot weather to protect Fido's paws.
- ❖ **TIME LIMITS.** On hot or cold days, limit visits. During the summer, it is a good idea to go the park early in the morning or late in the evening and avoid the high temperatures of mid-day.
- ❖ **NO MOUNTING.** If you see your dog mounting another dog, please stop the behavior immediately. Not all dogs view mounting favorably and your dog could aggravate another dog.
- ❖ **SPAY/NEUTER YOUR DOG.**
- ❖ **OBSERVE SENIORS.** Many senior dogs don't enjoy the stimulation of an off-leash dog park. Look for signs that your dog might be under stress. If so, go for a walk instead.
- ❖ **NO AGGRESSIVE DOGS.** A dog park isn't for every dog! Be responsible and don't bring a dog that has a bite history or is territorial. Prevention is one easy way to stay out of harm's way.
- ❖ **NO YOUNG CHILDREN.** Be sure to know your park's rules when it comes to children and remember that these are dog parks and not petting zoos. Typically, no children under 12 are permitted. Strange dogs and toddlers do not mix.

A 50-pound Siberian Husky greeted my husband the other day. We love Huskies, and if we could, we would get a pack, move up north and go mushing everyday. We did that in Vermont a few years ago on vacation and it was an exhilarating experience. For those of you who have never tried it, I strongly recommend it. At any rate, the Husky entered a state of atropism so he must have been jumping on my husband about ten times. The owner was nowhere in sight of course and this was a completely unacceptable greeting. The funny thing was that my husband was wearing his UCONN Huskies polo shirt with a picture of their Husky logo. "Hmmm" I wondered. "Can dogs read, too?" That'll be the next column.

Alison Deeb is President and Founder of MARDOG, Inc. (the Morris Area Responsible Dog Owners' Group) a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that focuses on dog park development in Morris County, New Jersey. For chapter or sponsor opportunities, Alison can be reached at (973) 290-9338 or visit the online dog park community web site at www.mardog.org.