

Dog interaction, such as in dog parks, when is it OK, when should it be interrupted? What etiquette and protocols should we observe?

By Kaye Hargreaves, Wagging School, Feb 2016

Dog interactions

I am not a great fan of dog parks. In fact I avoid them. This may come as a surprise to you. Most dog owners think that it is really important to walk their dog, and usually this means going to the park and letting the dog off to play with other dogs. So what's not to like?

In a nutshell, there is too much bad behaviour. Uncontrolled, free-for-all "play" which can actually do damage. It might look cute at the time, and your puppy or young adolescent dog goes home exhausted.

However, as a trainer, I see a huge number of older dogs with reactivity problems – lunging and barking at other dogs. The owners often say "Oh, but he never did this as a puppy". No. To quote Dr Ian Dunbar "that's because puppies don't do that stuff. The behaviour comes on line when the dog is older." However, what you do (or fail to do) when your dog is a puppy will influence what happens later.

What goes on in dog parks?

You want your dog to be confident with other dogs, neither nervous nor aggressive, and able to work out where

they stand with new dogs that they meet. However, this is not achieved by to uncontrolled play.

Uncontrolled play in puppy class and in the park can produce:

- unruly behaviour that is learned and reinforced by play
- fear-based aggression in nervous dogs that get bullied by others
- aggression in dogs that succeed in bullying others

In basic pet training for young adult dogs, it is important to teach both dogs and handlers to respect each dog's need for "personal space" and not to go charging up to strange dogs.

When is it OK?

You need to learn to read your dog's body language. Learn the signs of when your dog is enjoying an interaction. There is no sign of trying to get away, snapping or excessive unruliness.

Body posture, tail position, facial expression and ear position are all signs.

There are many other great resources available to educate dog owners.

When should it be interrupted?

If any dog is stressed, over-excited, being a bully or being bullied the owners should interrupt the dogs immediately.

My “rules of engagement” with my own dogs are:

1. Feet on the ground (not on top of the other dog’s back)
2. Mouth closed (of course the dogs can pant, but not open their mouth to use the other dog’s neck as a tug toy)



Paris is offending on both counts

I recommend that you get Sue Sternberg’s App called ***Dog Park***. It is a free download, full of great photos and videos of interactions and what they mean. Put it on your phone and take it to the park.

How should it be interrupted?

Dogs can be called or lured apart. However, this is best taught in a class, with low levels of excitement and distraction before you can rely on calling your dog in the park.

What etiquette and protocols should we observe?

Clancy says: Practice your PETIQUETTE (or P in the Park)

1. Permission
 - Please ask first
2. Politeness
 - Play nicely
3. Practice
 - Perfect calling and releasing your dog

How can clubs and trainers help?

Socialization with dogs, especially in Puppy Class, should include opportunities for puppies to check each other out, to learn how to read other dogs’ body language and react appropriately, as well as accepting human control, for example when to stop playing, and to spend some time settling down together.

In class, dogs sit calmly and pay attention. Then as a reward they are released to say hello briefly. Over-excited and unwelcome contact is a major cause of conflict and stress in dog parks.



Clancy and Luka – a polite hello

In my classes, the “rules of engagement” are:

- A pair of dogs and handlers stand at least 3 metres apart (so that neither dog is intruding into the other dog’s personal space)
- The dogs should be sitting calmly
- The handlers ask “is it OK for the dogs to meet?”
- If it’s OK, the handlers give their dogs a release cue (I like “say hello”), and let the dogs go into the centre and check each other out.
- Handlers praise dogs in a calm, relaxed, happy tone of voice
- After a brief interaction, handlers call their dogs apart. Reward them, then if the dogs are calm, handlers may release them again.

In my dreams, at least some people will follow a similar procedure in the park.