

GOOD DOG, BAD DOG

At the Dog Park, It's Up to You

BY ANNA RABHAN

Once again, the dog days of summer are upon us, and while we may be tempted to stay indoors in the air conditioning, our dogs, especially the very active breeds, have different plans. While the dog park is literally hot these days, it can also be a hotbed of misbehavior, both human and canine.

By far, the biggest issue when it comes to behavior and etiquette at the dog park isn't a doggie issue at all, it's owner inattentiveness. In his book *How to Raise the Perfect Dog*, famed dog behavior expert Cesar Millan (www.cesarsway.com) reinforces the need to pay attention when he says, "... adults as well as children need to learn to read a puppy's energy and body language ... Be ahead of your dog; see potential problems coming and avert or manage them...." Everyone knows you're supposed to pick up your dog's poo, but that won't happen if you don't see him go because you're engrossed in your cellphone conversation. You can't prevent a dog fight if you're too busy talking to the other dog's owner that the two of you don't notice the body language change in your pooches. No one's saying that those human activities should be forbidden, but owners must keep an eye on their dogs at all times. If you're not good at dividing your attention, it's safer for you and Fido if you hang up the phone and focus on quality time with your furry friend.

Speaking of human behavior, one Riverside dog owner shared another anecdote and dog park tip: Don't wear your Sunday best to the park. And if you do, don't get mad when someone's wet dog

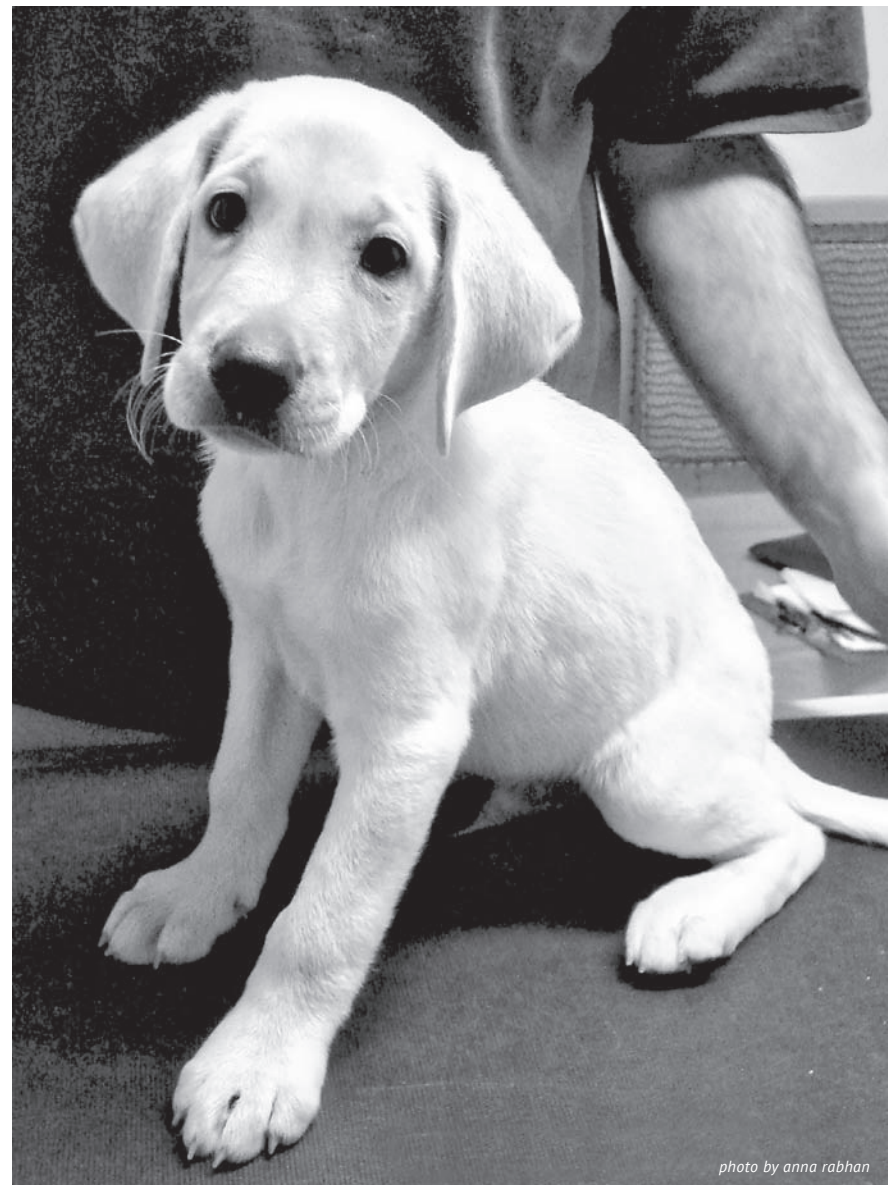


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shakes near you and gets you dirty. The dog park motto is, "The dirtier you are, the more fun you had!"

However, dogs should not jump on people, no matter what the biped is wearing. In an online poll done for Millan's website, 51 percent of subscribers listed jumping as the most common and frustrating problem they face. The most important reason dogs should keep four on the floor is that a dog who jumps on people will likely jump on anyone – an elderly person, a small child, someone who's not expecting it – and could cause serious injury.

If you're on the receiving end of such a greeting, don't reward the behavior with laughter and petting. Also, raising a knee in that situation is reflexive for some people, but try not to. A knee to a dog's airway could severely injure it. Instead, turn away (but not so you can't see what the dog might do next). Dogs ignore and walk away from other dogs they don't want to play with. If he persists, block the dog with your hand and step forward, saying, "No!" in a firm tone of voice. Sure, this might count as reinforcing attention, but at this point, your safety takes precedence over the dog's training. Additionally, the dog might take it the way it's meant, as a "correction," which we'll get back to later.

If your dog is the jumper, leash him for a "time out." With repetition, dogs learn what behaviors cause fun time to end. As you are disciplining your dog, apologize to the other human and explain that jumping is a behavior you're working on (hopefully, that's true). If you really want to make nice, ask for the other person's help with your training efforts and explain what you want to do. If he or she agrees (and only after your dog is calm), have the dog "meet" the new human with all paws on the ground. Keep trying until he does it. Then, and only then, should you reward him with praise and affection. Be sure to thank the other person for their help and patience.



photo by anna rabhan

Another issue can arise at the dog park due to differing dog personalities. Some only want to interact with other dogs, while athletic pooches may see the dog park as their gym, their place to exercise. If your dog is very social and you come upon another dog who seems focused on what he's doing, don't force an interaction. Think of the cues people give at your human gym. If someone nods in response to your greeting, does not remove his earbuds and remains focused on his workout, you get the message that he's not interested in a conversation. Same at the dog park. If your dog insists, running after and blocking the other dog, taking whatever toy it's using to exercise, or engaging in other attention-seeking behaviors, take it to another area of the park. There will be social butterflies elsewhere happy to hang out with your pooch. The other dog's owner will appreciate you not letting your dog be "that guy" at the gym. And if yours is the gym rat, explain politely to the other human that your dog likes to get his exercise at the dog park and isn't really interested in socializing.

It's important for vaccinated puppies of an appropriate age to interact with other dogs; they learn a lot about being a dog that way. However, puppies will test and cross the boundaries of acceptable behavior simply because they don't know any better, and also because they are much more interested in other dogs at that age than in food, toys or people, so distracting them may not be easy. Some common puppy behaviors around other dogs are jumping on them, biting at their ears and jowls, chasing them, and stealing the other dogs' toys as a way to taunt or invite play. If the puppy's owner is clearly making an effort to discipline and train his or her dog, give them both a little slack. However, a puppy who is allowed to misbehave consistently or who is even rewarded for misbehavior (it happens!) will become a hard-to-handle adult dog. The study "Behavioral Reasons for Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats to 12 Shelters," published by the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, showed that dogs were surrendered to shelters most frequently before age two and that the vast majority of those dogs had no training. Unprepared owners are clearly a problem for pups, so don't be afraid to politely offer some help in the form of information on where the owner can get training for the puppy and helpful training books and websites.

If the owner persists in his or her cluelessness, it's well within reason to speak to the park management (if it's a membership park) because a badly behaved dog puts himself and the people and dogs around him in danger.

Don't be surprised if older dogs "correct" a puppy who is misbehaving. A "correction" should consist of a sharp, non-contact snap of the jaws and/or a sharp, meaningful bark. This is how dogs naturally "teach" their young which behaviors are unacceptable. This is not an attack and you shouldn't overreact, which could teach the puppy to fear other dogs. On the other hand, encouraging it is a clear sign of an overwhelmed puppy owner. At times, you will hear owners of young dogs say to other dogs who are being pestered, "Show him who's boss," or, "Teach him not to do that." It is the responsibility of neither other dogs nor other dog owners to train your puppy. If you find yourself wishing other dogs would correct your puppy, then you've identified an area in which you need to redouble your training efforts and, perhaps, seek the services of a professional trainer. A couple of places in Jacksonville are PetSmart (www.petsmart.com) and the K-9 Obedience Club of Jacksonville (www.k9obedienceclub.org). Also, dog parks will frequently offer training classes.

The good news is that getting your dog to be on his best behavior at the park is mostly about awareness—awareness of where he is, what he's doing and what he's thinking about doing. With a little awareness, you and your pooch can have a cool summer at the dog park!

Please email your questions, comments or suggestions to anna@eujacksonville.com.

DOG PARKS

FREE DOG PARKS

Confederate Park's Dog Park

956 Hubbard Street in Springfield
This popular park is the place for urban dogs to hang. There are separate areas for dogs of different sizes with double-gate entry and water fountains for dogs.

Tillie Fowler, across from NAS

They've just added this dog park to Tillie Fowler, so not many people know about it. It can range from deserted to a few dogs, but that might change as word gets out. Pass the playground on the left and look left for the green fencing. There's a space for a small-dog park and another, larger area for large dogs. It's a wooded area, so your dog might get dirty, but there's no water feature, so he won't get wet.

Wingate in Jacksonville Beach

It's open from dawn till dusk, but is sometimes closed for maintenance on Thursdays until 5 pm. Use 605 Penman Rd. S. for Mapquest or your GPS. The water feature is fenced off, so your dogs won't be swimming.



Davis Park in Ponte Vedra

There are two different areas for your dog to play in. Both have ponds dominating the landscape, so don't expect your dog to be dry at the end of his play session. Luckily, there's a dog wash area. It's fenced in, so even if your dog hates the hose, you'll be able to keep him where he needs to be.

Paws Park at Treaty Park

1595 Wildwood Dr., St. Augustine
The fences are only four feet tall, so if you have a jumper, be aware. Most dogs, however, are happy to run about and play. Bring water bowls and water.

PAY-FOR-PLAY DOG PARKS

Pay-for-Play dog parks are generally bigger and more well-kept than free parks, but do expect that you will have to bring vaccination papers. Because they check for this, you'll know that the dogs your dog is playing with also have their vaccinations.

Dogwood Park

7407 Salisbury Rd. S. (One mile past Dave & Busters, off of JTB, Belfort exit)
Cost: \$11/day (\$1.25 for each additional dog from the same family).

As the largest dog park in the area at 25 acres, there's plenty of ground to cover. The main area features a large pond, or you can take your dog for a walk in Barkham Woods. There's even a small playground in a separate area for kids and dogs, a small-dog area, and, if your dog has agility training, an agility course. Check their website, www.jaxdogs.com, for current hours. Rinse your dog off outside or pay for a bath inside (towels, shampoo and bath facility provided).

Julington Creek Animal Walk

12075-300 San Jose Blvd.
Cost: \$15/day

This place feels more like a resort than a dog park, with its doggie swimming pools (there are two) and well-kept trails. An agility field completes the fun at these nine-acre digs. They also board dogs. See their website for hours and more: www.jcaw.com/walk/park.html. The park is open seven days a week for members; they're closed Sundays for day passes.

Poochie's Swim and Play Park

21 Fountain Dr., Orange Park
Cost: \$10/day (first time visitors get a \$5 discount).

This park also offers doggie day care and has a separate area for that. Trees, sand, open agility course and a pond for poochies can be found at this Orange Park dog park. They close during the heat of the day (noon-2 pm) but are open every day. Check out the website for more info: www.poochiespark.com.

- Free city dog parks can be found by searching municipal websites such as www.coj.net and www.jacksonvillebeach.org.

- www.floridapets.net/Jacksonville.html offers a list, with details, of beaches, free dog parks and membership dog parks in the area.

- www.doggoes.com/parks/florida/jacksonville offers a helpful map with a key that indicates things like whether the area is fenced or not.

- www.dogfriendly.com Use the map to choose Jacksonville and get a list of dog-friendly restaurants, stores and resources in addition to dog parks and dog-friendly parks and beaches.