

ONCOMMAND

Visiting the Dog Park by Siobhan Reilly

Dogs' behavior at dog parks and their social graces or lack of them, raises many questions for people. Many dogs enjoy playing with canine friends at the dog park, while some simply prefer the company of people to dogs. They have as much fun at the park with their human companions, as other dogs have playing with their canine friends. If your dog plays fetch or trots around the park with you ignoring other dogs then he or she is having a good time. It is beneficial for your dog to be out enjoying the park, even if not socializing with other dogs.

Some small dogs want to play with bigger dogs despite the chance of unintentional injury to the smaller dog. A small dog initiating contact with big dogs and going back for more wrestling is likely having fun. Only intervene occasionally for healthy time outs to end a play session and have your

dog rest for a moment. Large dogs may target smaller dogs to chase, as a game or prey drive gone awry, but this should not be allowed to happen.

It is reasonable to expect dog parents to prevent their dogs from bothering yours, if you move to another area to discourage them from playing. It is not reasonable to expect dog parents to restrain their dogs, if you remain in the area and allow your dog to initiate contact. Determine if canine rough and tumble play is bothering your dog or you. Signs of a dog's stress or fear include hiding between your legs, rapid, darting movements, excessive panting, aggression or active avoidance of other dogs.

There are options if you feel uncomfortable or your dog is visibly distressed – walk at the end of the park or leash walk in less congested areas outside of the dog



park or take your little dog into the small dog area. Human socialization and canine socialization needs do not always go hand in hand. However, dogs that are forced into social situations that make them uncomfortable may develop social problems such as aggression. Remember, when needed, a professional trainer has many programs to help you develop your dog's canine social skills. ■