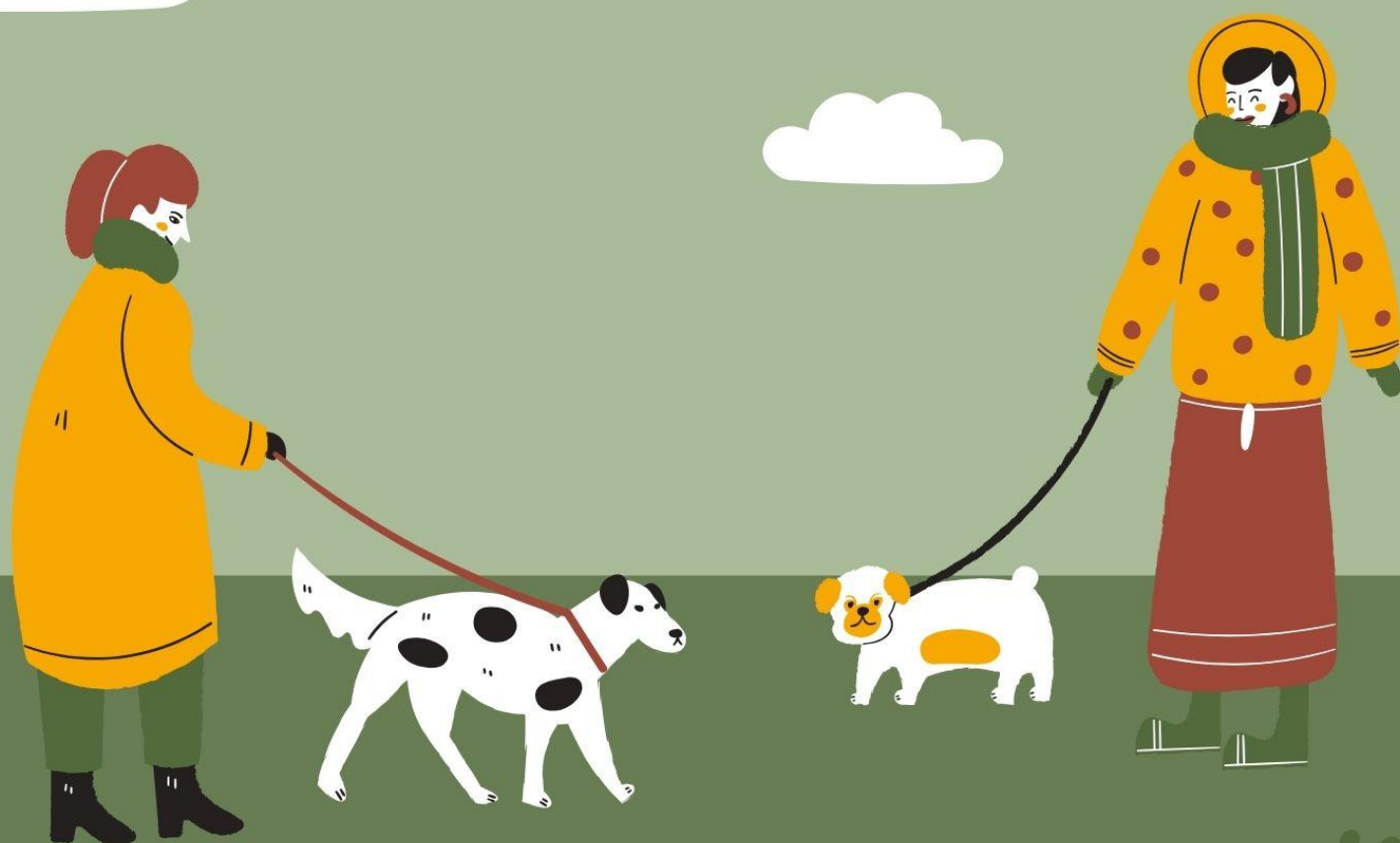


GUIDE TO PREVENTING AND INTERRUPTING CONFLICTS AT THE DOG PARK



Why read this guide?

This guide will teach you how to recognize the signs that a fight is about to break out between dogs and how to intervene safely. **It is important to understand that "resolving" a conflict between dogs is mainly a matter of prevention** — it is much easier and safer to avoid a fight than to try to stop it once it has started.

Understanding these techniques is very important before going to the dog park for several reasons:

- **To protect everyone:** your dog, other dogs, and humans present
- **Avoiding trauma** that can change your dog's behavior for a long time
- **Maintain a good atmosphere** for everyone who uses the park
- **Avoid serious accidents** that could lead to injuries or lawsuits
- **Maintain your privileges to access** the park (a dog involved in multiple fights may be banned)

Knowing how to intervene in the right way can make the difference between a minor misunderstanding and a real fight. This guide will give you the tools to act with confidence and safety, **emphasizing prevention as the best strategy**.

Before going to the park: Are you ready?

Is your dog in the right condition for the park?

Dogs that should NOT go to the dog park:

- **Dogs under 4 months old:** they are much too young, and parks are not the ideal place for socialization.
- **Sick dogs:** diarrhea, cough, worms, or any other health problem that can be transmitted

- **Injured or injured dogs:** even a simple ear infection can make a dog irritable and unpredictable
- **Females in heat:** risk of creating fights and dangerous situations
- **Aggressive or dangerous dogs:** prohibited in city dog parks
- **Dogs that are overly stressed or anxious** around other dogs
- **Dogs that chase small dogs:** if your dog has previously shown intense chasing behavior toward small dogs, it should not go to a park where small and large dogs are together

Owners should:

- **Keep a leash in hand and ensure their dog has a collar or harness** so they can intervene quickly
- **Be able to call their dog back at any time**

Recommended preparation:

- Exercise your dog before going to the park: walk on a leash, play ball, or do a training session
- **Choose a good time:** not too crowded, avoid the hottest hours of the day
- **Bring water** for your dog if the park does not provide it

Do ALL dogs need the dog park?

Important to remember:

It is not mandatory for a dog to interact with other dogs if all of its needs are being met. Dogs' sociability varies greatly depending on several factors, and each dog's personality must be respected.

How sociability changes with age

Puppies (under 6 months): Even though they are at an important stage in learning to socialize, dog parks are too unpredictable and risky. Puppies learn best with other puppies their own age or calm, well-trained adult dogs in controlled environments.

Young dogs (6 months–2 years): Often more energetic and sociable, but may not know how to behave around other dogs. This is a period when fights are more frequent, so they need to be monitored more closely.

Adult dogs (2–7 years old): Generally, their preferences are well established. Some love groups, others prefer to play with only one or two dogs, and others prefer the company of their humans alone.

Senior dogs (7+ years old): Often less tolerant of overly energetic or rude dogs. May prefer quieter plays or avoid large groups altogether.

Signs that your dog may not be suited to the dog park

- Hides under benches or tables or constantly seeks your comfort
- Stays cuddled against the fence to 'get out'
- Panting excessively, drooling, or trembling (showing signs of stress)
- Never initiates play and avoids other dogs
- Is constantly harassed by other dogs
- Becomes a bully himself who won't let up
- Does not know how to play according to the rules of canine language

The myth of "getting him used to" other dogs

CAUTION: Taking a dog that is afraid of other dogs to the dog park in order to "get him used to them" is a myth and a very bad idea!

Imagine someone who is very afraid of spiders. Would we help that person by putting them in a bathtub full of spiders? Of course not! The person would be even more afraid after this traumatic experience. It's exactly the same with a fearful dog at the park.

Why it doesn't work:

- A scared dog in a stressful environment will associate other dogs with this bad experience.

- Instead of getting used to it, they may develop even greater fears
- It may even become aggressive out of fear (attacking to defend itself)
- The dog park is the MOST stressful environment possible for a dog that is fearful of other dogs

The right approach: If your dog is afraid of other dogs or has social difficulties, **consult a canine behavior specialist**. These professionals know how to help a dog overcome its fears in a gradual, positive, and safe manner.

Habituation to other dogs should be done in a controlled manner, at a safe distance, with calm and predictable dogs — never in the chaos of a dog park.

Respect your dog's choice

Listen to your dog: If, after several well-prepared attempts, your dog clearly shows that he doesn't like the dog park, respect his choice! Forcing an unsociable dog can create long-lasting trauma.

Quality vs. quantity: A dog with one or two regular "dog friends" can be much happier than a stressed dog in a crowded park.

Change over time: Social preferences can change with age, experiences, or health changes. A dog may love the park when young and hate it as it gets older.

Assess before entering: The golden rule

Observe who is in the park

Before entering, take a few minutes to assess the situation:

Look at the types of dogs present:

- It is not ideal to mix small and large dogs together. There is too much risk of accidents and serious injuries, especially when play between dogs turns into hunting instinct.

Count the number of dogs:

- **If small groups of dogs playing together have more than five dogs (small or large), the risk of fights increases significantly. Remember that dogs prefer to play in groups of two or three. Any more than that, and dogs can feel stressed and competitive.**
- **General recommendation:** approximately 1 dog per 5,000 square feet to reduce the risk of conflicts due to lack of space.
- If you feel there are too many dogs for the space available, wait until there are fewer dogs or come back later.
- **Practical tip:** even if the rules allow it, if you see 5 or more excited or energetic dogs playing together, it is often best to wait.

Observe interactions:

- Is one dog being bullied by another, or is one dog playing too intensely in its play?
- Does it look like they are playing nicely, with breaks and each dog taking turns chasing the other?
- Is it always the same dog that chases or is chased?

Observe the park users:

- Are they paying attention, speaking, or distracted by their phones?
- Are they standing still?
- Does the overall atmosphere seem relaxed or tense?

Observe your own dog

- Does he want to go there or does he show signs that he doesn't want to?
- Does he seem uncomfortable around other dogs?

Practical tip: Not sure? Take the time to walk around the park fence once or twice. This will allow you to observe whether your dog is hesitant and how the other dogs are behaving.

Understanding fights: Causes and warning signs

The main causes of fights at the dog park

Environmental causes:

- **Protection of resources:** tree branches, toys, food, or human attention
- **Too many dogs:** too many dogs in too small a space
- **Mix of sizes:** small and large dogs together

Dog-related causes:

- **Poor communication:** dogs that are poorly socialized or fearful
- **Too much excitement** in the park
- **Overly direct or rude approaches** between dogs
- **Hunting instinct:** large dogs that no longer distinguish between small dogs and prey
- **Dogs unsuitable for the park:** anxious, aggressive dogs, or dogs that prefer to play individually

Causes related to owners:

- **Lack of supervision:** owners distracted by their phones or conversations
- **Owners who do not move:** staying in the same place without moving to supervise
- **Owners who do not respect** their dog's **level of sociability**

Learning dog language to prevent conflicts

Dogs naturally use these signals to say that they are uncomfortable and to avoid disputes. **Recognizing these signals allows you to intervene BEFORE a dispute begins.** See the document on canine language:

Canine language: recognizing doggy signs of discomfort

(Thanks to our colleagues at the Montreal SPCA for this public information page!)

Signs of GOOD play between dogs

- There are **breaks** in play (dogs stop, shake themselves, sniff the ground, etc.)
 - It's not always the same dog that gets chased or wrestled with; **they take turns**
 - The dogs are able to **switch roles** in wrestling plays.
 - The dogs pretend to be less strong (they **sometimes let the other win**)
 - If one dog seems less interested, the others are able to **leave it alone** without insisting
 - Dogs **also** take the time to **explore their environment, not just play with other dogs.**
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Active prevention: Using the dog park properly

How to enter safely

1. **Enter the entrance enclosure (airlock) one dog at a time**
2. **Close the doors** behind you at all times
3. **Unleash your dog in the entryway** before entering the park (important so your dog has a way to escape)
4. **Wait until the entrance is clear** or ask people to call their dogs back to clear the door
5. We don't want your dog to feel overwhelmed as soon as it enters

Constant supervision of your dog = The key to prevention

Your attention must be 100% focused on your dog:

- **Turn off your cell phone, avoid long conversations or distractions!**
- **Stay mobile:** don't stay in one place
- **Learn dog language** and the rules of good dog play

- **Watch, intervene, and control** — it's your legal responsibility
- Prevent **several dogs from chasing a single dog** (known as "ganging up")

Exercise: Teach your dog how to come back to you in all circumstances!

Manage roles: victim or harasser?

If your dog is the victim

- **Become his safe haven** by "protecting" him
- **Take him away** from the stressful situation
- Over time, he will understand that he can count on you if he comes to you when he is not feeling well. This gives him one more option instead of resorting to fighting

If your dog is the bully

Signs that your dog is bullying:

- He always chases the same dog without allowing himself to be chased in return
- He does not respect the language of other dogs
- He becomes too intense in his play

How to intervene:

1. **Gently remove him** and calmly take him away
2. **Redirect his attention** to something else
3. If that doesn't work, **remove him from the park**
4. **Isolate him for a few seconds** in a calm, neutral manner
5. They will eventually understand that they lose out by behaving this way

How to stop a fight in progress

ABSOLUTE safety rules

⚠ **NEVER with your hands near their heads:** NEVER intervene with your hands to try to separate two dogs by their heads or collars. The risk of accidental bites is too great — dogs caught up in the action may bite anything that moves near them.

⚠ **Stay calm:** Yelling is useless and can make the situation worse. The stress you convey can escalate the fight. Control your negative emotions — acute stress can impair your ability to think clearly.

⚠ **Your safety first:** Never put yourself in danger. Most fights between dogs last only a few seconds and are more impressive than dangerous most of the time.

Intervention methods suitable for dog parks

Step 1: Firm recall and removal (preferred method)

This technique is recommended by professionals as the safest in a dog park:

- **Move away** while firmly calling your dog by name
- **Use a firm** but not panicked **tone:** "Rex, HERE!"
- Since a dog's hearing is more developed than its sight, it should eventually hear you and come to you
- **IMPORTANT:** This method only works if BOTH owners do the same thing simultaneously
- If only one dog obeys, the other could take advantage of the situation to attack once the first dog has turned its back

Step 2: Loud distractions

Techniques that can be used in a dog park without objects:

- **Clap your hands loudly** several times
- **Shout "STOP!" or "NO!"** in a very firm voice (different from panicked cries)

- **Bang loudly on the metal fence** of the park if possible
- **Whistle loudly** if you know how to whistle
- The goal is to create a distraction strong enough to break their concentration

Step 3: As a last resort — the hind legs method

⚠️ ONLY if there are TWO PEOPLE acting in perfect coordination:

- **Approach from behind**, never from the front
- **Grasp** your dog's **hind legs firmly** above the hocks/thighs (upper part of the legs).
- **Lift and pull backward** like a wheelbarrow to unbalance the dog
- **Immediately step back** to create distance.
- **Both owners must act AT THE SAME TIME**, otherwise one dog may turn on the other

RISKS of this method:

- The dog may mistake this for an attack by another dog and bite you reflexively
- Risk of injury if performed incorrectly
- Never use if you are alone or if the other owner is not cooperating

Crucial points during the intervention

Coordinate with the other owner:

- Communicate clearly: "We're doing the recall together!"
- If you have to use the hind leg method: "On the count of three, we pull together!"
- Never act alone if the other owner is not ready

Stay at a safe distance:

- Never approach the head and mouth area
- Keep your hands and face away from the area of contention

- Be prepared to back away quickly

Recognize your limits:

- If the fight appears to be very violent or if the dogs are not responding to any techniques, call for help
- Some fights stop on their own after a few seconds
- Sometimes it is better not to intervene than to intervene incorrectly and make the situation worse

What you should NEVER do

✗ Never:

- Put your hands near their heads, mouths, or collars
- Pull on collars (risk of strangulation and aggressive reaction)
- Hit the dogs (this increases their aggression)
- Act alone using the hind leg method
- Shout in a panicked or hysterical manner
- Expect to have objects available in a dog park (sticks, water, etc.)

After immediate separation

1. **Maintain distance:** Do not release the dogs immediately
2. **Move your dog away** from the area of conflict
3. **Stay in control:** Put the leash back on if necessary
4. **Assess the situation** calmly before deciding what to do next

After the fight: Post-incident management

Immediate assessment

1. **Leave the park**
2. **Examine your dog** for any injuries
3. **Check his emotional** state — is he stressed, frightened, or still excited?

4. **Contact a veterinarian** if you suspect injuries

When to leave the park

Leave when things are going well so your dog has a positive experience:

- If you see that there are too many dogs
- If you see that your dog is no longer interested
- If he no longer wants to play with his friends

How to leave:

- Do not leash your dog in the park, but in the airlock
 - Close the doors properly when you leave
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Final message

Preventing fights starts long before you arrive at the dog park. A dog that can control its emotions, respond to commands, and communicate politely with other dogs will be a welcome visitor at any park.

The most serious disputes often arise because:

- The boundaries of a dog that does not want to play are not respected
- A play of chase turns into a hunting instinct
- Disputes over resources
- Owners do not actively supervise their dogs.

Your vigilance, preparation, and ability to intervene calmly make you a responsible guardian for all dogs in the park. By following these tips, you will help maintain a safe and enjoyable environment for everyone.

You don't bring a dog to the dog park to socialize it! You bring a WELL-SOCIALIZED dog to the dog park!

If you feel the need to learn more or if your dog has persistent difficulties with other dogs, don't hesitate to check out a qualified dog trainer. The SPCA de l'Outaouais recommends finding a trainer among the members of the Regroupement québécois des intervenants en éducation canine (rqiec.com).

Together, let's create safe and harmonious dog parks for everyone!