

Many Calgarians are turning to off-leash parks to provide the opportunity for their dogs to walk without a leash and enjoy nature. Owners and their dogs that frequent off-leash parks need to know that there are guidelines to adhere and be aware of skills/practices to safely participate in the experience.

Dogs need to have supervised socialization and play sessions with other dogs prior to going to an off-leash park. This provides them the ability to more reliably anticipate their responses to other dogs and to discover whether they enjoy other dogs' company.

All dogs that go to off-leash parks need to have a reliable recall – a command to come that your dog responds to. Sometimes wildlife, young children, and members of the public are present and do not want to interact with dogs. Also, not all dogs enjoy playing with other dogs in a densely populated area, just like many humans don't enjoy the bar scene. If dog owners see signs (calming signals, ignoring, extreme submission, dominance, aggression) that their dog is uncomfortable, owners need to intervene and call their pets out of the situation immediately.

Dog owners need to educate themselves on canine communication to effectively help their canine companions to deal with conflicts - with minimal impact. It is not natural for most dogs to walk away from conflict, but we can help them to make the 'right' choice if they have a reliable recall. Highly reward your recall with valuable treats or toys. If your dog has a resource guarding issue around food or toys with other dogs, they should not be at an off-leash park until their concerns are addressed. The best way to do this is by working with a professional dog trainer.

Here are some cautions and suggestions when using off-leash areas:

- Avoid bringing puppies under five months of age
- Avoid letting your dog off-leash in a dog park if he is not responsive to your verbal cues
- Avoid talking on your cell phone - you must supervise your dog at all times and give your dog your full attention
- Use toys and treats discretely
- Leave a dog park if you feel that your dog is either being a bully, the play is getting too rough or your dog is just not having fun
- Be cautious about taking advice from other park patrons who are not dog professionals
- Keep children nearby. Kids are welcome at the off-leash parks, but it's important to keep an eye on them and make sure they are behaving appropriately. Children who run or yell can frighten or intimidate dogs, or they may be seen as prey and be chased by the dogs. Children should also never approach unfamiliar dogs.
- Always clean up after your dog

Off-leash parks can be exciting, enjoyable social outings for both humans and canines, if managed correctly.

For more information about Calgary Humane Society's classes, including Toto Recall (for off-leash parks), please visit www.calgaryhumane.ca. For more information about the City of Calgary's dog bylaws, please visit www.calgary.ca. If you witness a dog bylaw concern, please call 311.