

Leash Free

How can I have my dog off leash responsibly?

As a dog guardian, you most likely love the idea of letting your dog run off leash. It is so enjoyable to watch your dog play and interact with other dogs. They look so happy!

Doggie play dates, dog-park visits and off leash walking are all opportunities for you to let your dog off leash so he can run and play and sniff wherever he wants. However, in order to enjoy these activities in a responsible, safe way you need to perfect and employ two major skills.

Reliable Off-Leash Recall: Even when he is highly distracted by another dog, person or wildlife your dog needs to come to you when called! This is a requirement to insure the safety of your dog and other dogs as well as people and wildlife. It is also a matter of common courtesy that you should not allow your dog to run up to and bother other people or dogs. (Please review our **Come When Called** handout for detailed instructions on how to get a reliable recall.)



Be Aware of the Environment: You have to keep an eye on your dog and know what he is up to! Your goal is to see and recognize environmental distractions (before your dog does), call him back and get him under control. That way you will be able to stop inappropriate behavior before it starts or becomes rude. Don't become so engrossed in your hike or conversation that you lose track of your dog. All of this is much easier if you have a good relationship with your dog and he prefers your company. (Please review our **Connect with Your Canine** handout.)

A good strategy to employ, whether on a play date, in the dog park or on the trail is to occasionally call your dog back to you, out of play or off the trail. When he comes back to you, praise and reward heavily, then let him go back out to play or walk. This will let him know that when you call him to you it does not mean the leash goes on and fun time is over!

Establish "Off Leash Guidelines":

Off Leash Dog Deportment: Never allow your unleashed dog to run up to and try to meet a leashed dog. There are many reasons a dog may be leashed. There could be medical issues; the dog may be unreliable off leash; or the guardian just wants him leashed. In any case, it's not up to the guardian to explain it to you. It's up to you to take responsibility and proactively control your dog in this situation.

Barking & Chasing Policy: Your dog shouldn't bark at or chase wildlife, bicyclists or horseback riders. If your dog has chased deer, squirrels or wild turkeys in the past, you may have to leash him if you enter a possible "wildlife zone" or if you notice your dog becoming unusually alert and staring into the trees.

Biology Breaks: Clean up after your companion. Not only is it common courtesy and the **law**, but dogs are "predatory" animals and their "poop" leaves a scent that can be alarming to other wildlife.



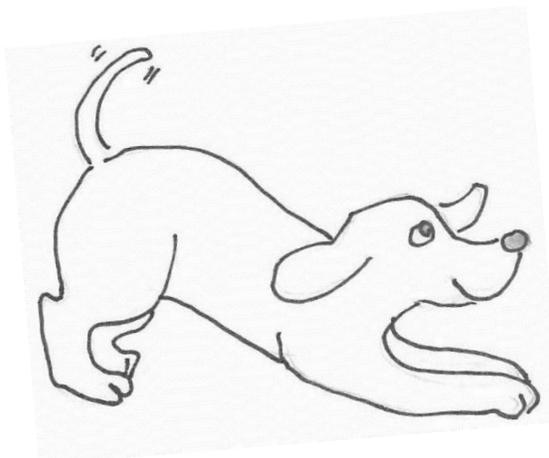
What are proper greetings between off leash dogs?

Your dog is going to encounter other dogs while he is off leash. The first thing to happen in any dog-to-dog interaction is the greeting. A “proper” greeting of two unleashed dogs is characterized by a slow, steady approach with both dogs arcing away from each other, before they engage in the sniff protocol at the neck and/or the anal area. They are NOT staring at each other and one dog is NOT rushing up to the other.

Running up and suddenly stopping is considered rude and even threatening in dog society. After the greeting, one or both may perform a play bow, or decide to go their separate ways. (Please see our **Body Language – Speaking “Dog”** handout for more information on dog body language.) It’s your job, as a responsible and knowledgeable guardian, to know when your dog is overwhelming another dog, or is concerned about another dog. When in doubt, recall him and demonstrate polite off leash control of your dog.

What does friendly dog play look like?

If your dog decides to play, whether during a play date, in the dog park or on the trail, it is important that you are knowledgeable about what “friendly” play looks like.



Role Playing: In general, dogs who are playing will change their “roles” quite a bit. The play stops and starts with numerous “check-ins” and renewed solicitations for play, which are known as play bows.

Give and Take: Often one dog might be the chased and the other dog is the chaser. At some point during the chase they switch roles.

Play Growls: Some dogs are quiet when they play and others (terriers) tend to be vocal. All parties involved should look like they are enjoying themselves but not behaving in an overly intense manner.

Compatible Play Styles: Some breeds, such as Labradors and Bully breeds, tend to be quite physical in their play. They can be very vigorous and body-slam other dogs. They are still in “play mode” but the other dog may not agree! When dogs have incompatible play styles they may have a hard time communicating with each other and trouble can erupt. (Please review our **Bully Breeds** handout.)

Myth busting: Dogs who body slam or go over the top of another dog (mounting) are not necessarily trying to “dominate” the other dog. They may be dogs who are poor at reading subtle canine body language. These behaviors are often the actions of young or adolescent dogs. When another dog snarls and snaps at such displays, the younger dog is being told to “mind his manners.” If a dog continues to try and mount other dogs, he should be taken out of the play for a time-out to calm down, and then monitored closely when/if he returns. Dog parks or that play group may not be appropriate for that dog.



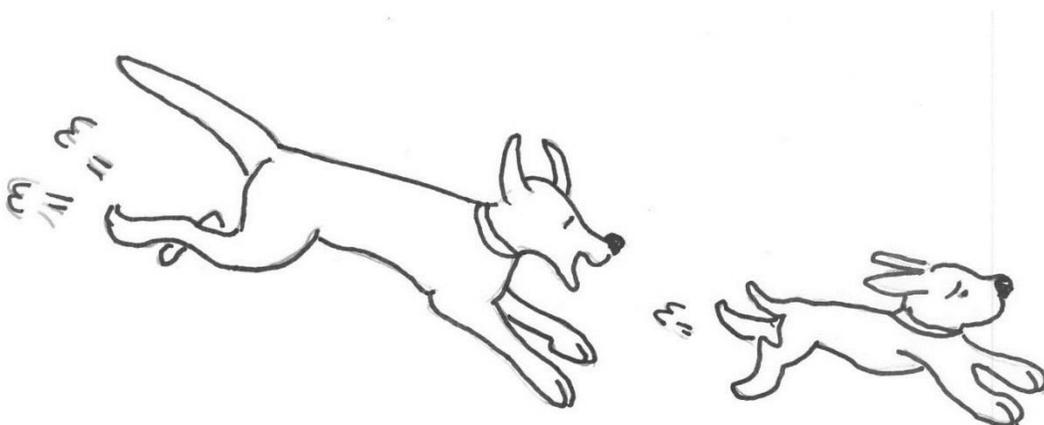
Troubleshooting:

Play Dates: These are occasions where 2-4 dogs and their guardians get together so the dogs can play together. Even in a small group it is important to remember the two safety requirements of keeping a close eye on the group play and making sure each dog has a reliable recall.

- Until a dog is socially mature, play partners should be carefully chosen dogs who will compliment your dog's personality and play style. If a young dog is being bullied or scared, he may become the bully or learn not to trust other dogs and become snarly and snappy towards other dogs.
- Call the dogs out of play at different times. This gives them a chance to check in with you and also calm down a little bit.
- Be ready to intervene if the play becomes too rowdy, the excitement level becomes too high or it looks like one dog is becoming overwhelmed by the others.

Dog Parks: (both formal and informal) have become increasingly popular as spaces for dogs to run free and socialize with other dogs. Dog parks can be a good way for you to allow your dog to stretch his legs and meet other dog buddies. Unfortunately, they can also be a place where your dog can be traumatized or even injured if the play is allowed to escalate out of control. You, as a responsible and knowledgeable guardian, need to be vigilant and watchful of both your dog and others when you take your dog to a dog park. Serious problems can happen in an instant. Here are things to remember when you are at the dog park:

- Occasionally call your dog to you out of the play zone. Praise him for coming to you, reward him handsomely and let him hang out with you for a minute or two, then let him go back to play. This gives him a chance to calm down and also lets him know that playtime isn't over whenever you call him!
- The dog park may be too overwhelming for shy or cautious dogs. Pay attention to his body language: Tail tucked? Crouching low and staying near you? Your dog is afraid and it is time to leave! This is not the right way to socialize your shy dog.
- Manage the dogs' behavior; don't let them "WORK IT OUT." Many dogs learn bad habits at dog parks. They may learn they have to protect themselves from overzealous play partners and may growl or snap. A dog hiding under a bench and snapping at other dogs is not a happy dog park dog.
- Make sure your dog is not participating in or is a victim of crowd chasing, where many dogs surround and chase another dog. Know the signs that indicate a friendly chase is turning into a predatory sequence and interrupt it immediately! (Please review our **Aggression in Dogs: An Overview** handout for information on the predatory sequence.)



- Frequent dog park visits teach dogs that they have the right to meet and greet other dogs at any time or place, because that's what they get to do at the dog park. This can create leash reactivity problems. Make sure your dog is getting plenty of non-dog park play and exercise to avoid this potential challenge.
- Dog parks are not for puppies or young dogs. They are too vulnerable to attack or being overwhelmed. When a very young dog has a traumatic experience with another dog, it can stay with him for the rest of his life.
- Unless you and your dog are alone in a dog park, playing fetch or other toy-based games is not a good idea. Some dogs may resource guard their toys and dogs chasing another dog playing fetch is not good for either the "fetcher" or the "chasers." (Please review our ***Play -Tug and Retrieving Games*** handout for exercise alternatives to the dog park).
- Some dogs become overly aroused and difficult to calm down during or after a dog park visit. Dogs make poor decisions when they are over-stimulated and it is appropriate to keep a lid on this arousal if your dog has this challenge.
- It's best to use the dog park when there are not many dogs present and the guardians are staying aware of their dogs. If at any time, you are uncomfortable with the activities of another dog toward your dog, leave the dog park.

Open Space Hiking: Letting your dog off leash in open space can be a very enjoyable experience for you and your dog. But there are some "trail etiquette" rules (in addition to legal restrictions) you need to be aware of. Remember the two requirements for safe and responsible off leash activities: a very reliable recall and active supervision of your dog.

- A basic tenet of trail etiquette is that most hikers do not want to meet your dog, no matter how friendly he may be. If you have a young, friendly dog who loves people and dogs, and who loves to run up to every living thing and say "Hi," then you need to teach him some manners. But why, you may ask? He's just being friendly. There are many different types of dogs on the trails and many dogs you meet on the trail do not appreciate having a strange dog run up into their faces. Such fast, face-to-face greeting behavior is considered rude in the dog world, and your dog may end up being corrected by an annoyed adult dog.
- Not all dogs on the trails are unleashed. If you come upon someone walking with a leashed dog it is your responsibility to get control of your dog immediately. A leashed dog is at a distinct disadvantage when encountering an unleashed dog. He is restrained and may not be able to move out of the way if he is uncomfortable with your approaching dog. Since he is unable to leave the situation (flight), he may feel forced to fight! It's not because he is mean, but because he is scared and it is your fault for not managing your dog.
- Calling out to someone "Oh, he's friendly!" is NOT the solution and borders on rudeness. It is not about your dog, who you know and love; it is about the other dog or person, who you don't know. It doesn't matter at all if your dog is friendly. What matters is the state of the other dog or person of which you know NOTHING!

Whether it is a play day, a visit to the dog park or a walk in open space, remember to be safe and considerate of others and enjoy the great outdoors with your canine friend.

Training Resources:

Marin Humane's dog parks are open to the public during posted hours and available for private rental.

Please see our website at [MHS Dog Parks](#) for further information on their use.

Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts various off leash training classes. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.