

Is Off-leash Play a Good Fit For Your Dog?



The Dog Gurus have a passion for off-leash dog play and want to help ensure all the dogs are safe and the dog's participating are a good match for off-leash playgroups. As a dog owner we want to help you:

- Understand the environment of off-leash play
- Determine if your dog would enjoy off-leash play
- Find the best pet care professional to provide off-leash play for your dog

Off-Leash Play Environment

We use off-leash dog play to describe the variety of environments that exist today for dogs to socialize with a group of dogs. Dog daycare, group play sessions, day camps and even dog parks are environments where groups of dogs from different families come together to socialize and play.

Keep in mind that the number of dogs in a playgroup and the physical size of the play space are very important variables. Some dogs socialize well in groups with a small number of dogs, but dislike larger groups. Other dogs do well in both small and large groups of dogs.

Physical space is very important to dogs and when they socialize this need for space is magnified. In our experience, dogs are safest when play areas allow an average of 75 square feet per dog (when medium and large dogs are mixed). For playgroups limited to only small dogs, 40 square feet per dog is sufficient.

The off-leash play environment can benefit dogs by providing social interactions, exercise and enjoyment. It is very important to select an environment that your dog enjoys and offers positive social experiences. More information on positive experiences is available in our Dog Play: Keeping it Safe and Fun card.

Will My Dog Enjoy Off-Leash Play?

There is not a one size fits all answer to this question. It depends on your individual dog and the specific off-leash play environment. This is the reason well-run pet care centers perform a "dog evaluation" prior to admitting a new dog to their playgroups.

Your dog is unique and several factors contribute to whether he will enjoy an off-leash play environment. Following is a list of traits that are typically shared by dogs that are a good match for off-leash dog play:

- Shows an interest in meeting new dogs
- Likes to play and interact with other dogs
- Comfortable going to new places
- Responsive to basic obedience cues

Most important in our mind is determining if your dog **enjoys** their social play experiences. A dog that is enjoying playgroup will:

- Have loose, wiggly body posture
- Willingly leave you to go play with other dogs
- Engage with other dogs or check-out the area where other dogs are located

In contrast, there are dogs that only tolerate but may not enjoy the off-leash play environment. A dog that doesn't enjoy the playgroup will:

- Have a stiff or fearful body posture
- Be nervous with obvious signs of stress or discomfort
- Stay very near you
- Not have an interest in other dogs or the physical space

If your dog does not enjoy off-leash play, that's ok. It's better to find another activity for him rather than forcing him to remain with the other dogs. If a dog is merely tolerating the off-leash environment, it is not safe to force him to remain in the environment. You cannot predict at what point the dog may reach his tolerance limit and feel forced to use aggression to protect or defend himself. Dogs can learn to become comfortable and enjoy new environments, but this is best done with the assistance of a trained pet professional.

Finding the Right Pet Professional

There are no national licensing or educational requirements for operators to offer off-leash dog play services. Some states and municipalities have their own regulations that, in our experience, are minimal care requirements and really do not address the unique safety aspects of off-leash play. This means dog owners must do their own research and understand the key elements to keeping their dog safe in an off-leash play environment.

The minimum requirements when researching pet centers to visit are those with:

- Staff members physically present with the dogs in a group leader role 100% of the time dogs are together in playgroups
- A formal process to screen all new dogs admitted to the playgroups that involves your dog meeting dogs from the group individually (e.g., your dog is just not added to the playgroup after you answer a few questions)
- Separate playgroups for dogs based on size, playstyle and age
- Training in dog body language and appropriate play behaviors for the staff supervising play
- Formal rest or nap periods for dogs attending playgroup for a full day

We suggest you first consider centers that are members of The Dog Gurus Community. These operators have made a commitment to ensure they have access to ongoing tools and resources that will raise the bar of safety in off-leash play. Look for the red membership badge on their website and posted in their lobby.

Other good options are pet centers that have taken The Dog Gurus Safety Pledge. This pledge is a commitment to safety by pet professionals offering off-leash dog play that includes the items listed above plus five others. Look for the blue safety pledge badge on their website or the pledge itself posted in their lobby.

To view a copy of the pet professionals safety pledge visit our website. While you are there, take the dog owner safety pledge and share it with your friends. Working together we will ensure off-leash dog play environments are safe and fun for all the dogs that attend. Our website is: www.TheDogGurus.com.