

Big Dogs, Little Dogs: Who Belongs Where?

One of the first things newcomers notice about our park is that it's divided into **three fenced sections: Areas 1, 2, and 3**. As the posted signs indicate, one of the key distinctions between the three areas is dog size:

Area 1: Bigger Dogs

Area 2: Smaller Dogs

Area 3: Tiny Dogs



But a quick glance around the park on most days, and a closer reading of the signs for Areas 2 and 3, reveals that **size is not the only factor** determining which dogs go where. So—how do newcomers know where to go? What are FORDOG's guidelines for appropriate use of each section?

The first, though not the only, **factor is size**.

Larger dogs can inadvertently injure their smaller peers during active play, simply due to the weight difference. If you have an active, larger breed dog (retriever or shepherd, for example) who enjoys lively, interactive play (chase and wrestle games) with other dogs, **Area 1 is the appropriate choice**.

Smaller dogs (beagles and mini-aussies, for example) will generally feel most secure with their physical peers in Area 2. Owners of the smallest or “teacup” breeds (such as chihuahuas or mini-dachshunds) can opt for Area 2 if they're comfortable with the mix of dogs present at a given time, or use Area 3, the smallest, least populated, and most protected area of the park.

But while size is an important factor, it is not the only consideration.

On any given day at the park, it is not unusual to see a few smaller dogs (often terriers) confidently romping with the “Big Guys” in Area 1 or a few larger dogs happily chasing balls, or just hanging out with their owners, in Area 2. And while it is less common, you may occasionally see a larger breed dog exercising in Area 3.

So, what gives?

The answer lies in FORDOG's recognition that age, temperament, and play style can also determine the safest and most appropriate peer group for some dogs. For example, some small but sturdy dogs, who are confident about interacting with their larger cousins, do fine in Area 1. **There is no rule prohibiting smaller dogs from using “the big dog side.”** Instead, owners need to exercise their own judgment and watch their dogs to ensure that they are playing happily and safely with the other dogs present.

Actually, because the mix of dogs changes almost minute by minute in all areas of the dog park, this means that **owners in both Areas 1 and 2 should be alert and paying attention at all times**.

The sign for Area 2 recommends its use for small dogs, puppies, and “shy dogs.” The first two groups are fairly self-explanatory, **but what about “shy dogs?”** This category allows for those dogs who are

naturally reserved, shy, or more “laid back” in their temperament and behavior, and who do not enjoy or are actually intimidated by the active play in Area 1.

Most of the larger dogs who regularly frequent Area 2 are focused on interacting with their owners (and their balls!) and do not engage in physical play with other dogs. A few who do play with smaller dogs are extremely gentle, like the Golden Retriever who will lie down on his back to play with a small friend.

Over the nine years of the Park’s existence, regular users of Area 2 have found that the mix of small dogs, shy/reserved dogs, and also elderly dogs works remarkably well most of the time because despite the size differences because the **behavior and play styles of the dogs are compatible.**

This approach does, however, require each person to be responsible for their own dog’s behavior and sensitive to the needs of the other dogs present. Owners of larger dogs who use Area 2 need to be sure their dog’s play style truly is compatible with small dogs and puppies. Larger dogs should NOT be running over smaller ones, for example, or seeking to play wrestle with a smaller dog who is clearly intimidated. Owners of small dogs, in turn, need to understand that well-mannered larger dogs are welcome to use Area 2 for the reasons stated above.

A note about Area 3:

The smallest enclosed space in the park, Area 3 was designed as a space for the tiniest dogs, who can easily be overwhelmed even in Area 2. That is still the most common way this space is used. However, it is also available for elderly dogs, dogs recovering from an injury, or dogs who don’t socialize well with others. **The sign at the entrance to Area 3 asks owners to ask permission to enter before entering if the space is already occupied.**

THAT SAID...

Problems can arise in any area of the park. These problems are typically due to behavior, rather than simply the size of the dogs. Small or large, no dog should be allowed to bully or harass others; humping, charging, rolling over, pinning to the ground, nipping and of course, biting, are unacceptable behaviors for any dog.

Some dogs play rough with one another, but there is a fine line between play and dominance – it is important to watch carefully to make sure that both dogs involved in a “wrestling match” are actually enjoying it. A larger dog who is friendly but very ‘high energy’ and exuberantly playful, can cause problems in Area 2, due to the combination of physical size and play style. Small dog owners do have the right to ask the owners of such dogs, or of larger dogs who are actually harassing their dogs, to move to Area 1.

But everyone should remember: this is a public park.

Not every problem can be solved: Occasionally, one may encounter an owner who is not responsive to the concerns of others, or even becomes hostile at the slightest hint that his or her dog may be behaving inappropriately. This doesn’t happen often, but when it does, it’s usually best to avoid a confrontation. Take your dog to another area of the park or go for a walk and try again later. No dog park is perfect, but good will, cooperation, and consideration of others – qualities generally displayed in abundance at our park – go a long way towards making the park a safe and happy place for all.