

The Pluses and Perils of Dog Parks

Excerpt from Practice for Real Life![©]

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The dog park can be a wonderful place for your dog to play, burn off energy and maintain good social skills, though it can also be a dangerous place where dogs can have traumatic experiences, possibly resulting in physical and/or psychological harm, or worse. Being knowledgeable, responsible and an observant handler will help to insure that you, your dog and those around you have a safe and constructive dog park experience. By escorting healthy, well-socialized, obedient dogs, obeying park rules and practicing good etiquette, every dog and handler can have a fun and positive experience. We offer the following advice to help make your dog park visits safer and more enjoyable.

Age. Most veterinarians recommend that puppies be at least 16 weeks of age before they are exposed to a multiple-dog environment. This would apply to *any* park or neighborhood, not just a dog park. The immune system of most puppies prior to 16 weeks of age simply isn't mature enough to readily fight off common viruses and bacteria that are found in all places where dogs congregate and relieve themselves. Sensitive puppies can be overwhelmed psychologically by the experience and should be introduced gradually over a period of weeks. Some puppies and juvenile dogs have too much exuberance for other dogs to accept in a dog park environment. Adult dogs often take offense with a very energetic youngster and may treat him with disdain if the youngster lunges towards them. We recommend our clients wait until their dogs are at least one year of age before taking them to a dog park.

Size: Dog parks are not typically good places for small breeds or puppies to mix with larger juvenile or adult dogs. The vast majority of dogs that have been killed in these parks have been small breeds and young puppies. Some dog parks provide a separate area for smaller dogs, a good idea, if you follow the rest of our recommendations.

Neuter or Spay. The hormones of an intact dog will contribute to an increase in the dog's capacity for protectiveness, possessiveness and aggression. These are not traits that are conducive to peaceful mingling in dog parks. Dogs that are spayed and neutered by six months of age are much less likely to have problems around other dogs. Dogs that are altered later in life will retain some tendency to exhibit established behaviors that could create problems in a multi-dog environment. While some intact dogs get along well in most circumstances with other dogs, this should be taken as the exception rather than the rule. Many jurisdictions actually prohibit intact dogs from using their dog parks for this reason.

Health. A healthy immune level is essential to maintaining a dog's good health, particularly when exposing your dog to any multiple-dog environment. Regardless of how infrequently your dog may need vaccination, having an annual check-up with your veterinarian is always a wise choice to head off potential problems in the early stages. Ask your veterinarian about the Bordetella vaccination which helps to protect your dog against Canine Bronchitis, often mistakenly referred to as "kennel cough." It is inadvisable to take a sick dog to a dog park for obvious reasons. It is also inadvisable to take dogs that are in pain as they will be more inclined to be temperamental towards other dogs.

Socialize. Many people think a dog park is the right place to start socializing dogs and some have actually been successful, but dogs should be well socialized long before they have their first dog park experience. Socialization should begin right from the day you bring a puppy home from their litter at eight weeks of age. Regardless of age, one exposure a week is generally not enough to establish a pattern of good socialization skills—three or four times a week will likely garner desirable results. Daily exposure would be even better. While it is unsafe to take an 8 to 16 week old puppy into a multiple dog environment, you should pursue a relationship in a *private environment* with a known, healthy and well-socialized *adult* dog that lives nearby. Adult dogs will do a much better job of teaching a puppy social etiquette than another puppy or juvenile dog. People who have more than one dog in their household may think their dogs are well socialized because they get along well with each other, but it is crucial for dogs to socialize *outside* of the pack. A good relationship is one where the adult dog will play calmly with, but not bully, the puppy. The adult dog should also gently discipline the puppy when the puppy pushes too far. Acceptable forms of discipline would include a growl, a snap or by pinning the puppy on the ground without doing injury to the puppy. If the puppy persists in being a pest in spite of these warnings, an adult dog would be justified to exhibit a harsher response, but should never maintain a prolonged attack, attempt to seriously harm or even *pursue* the puppy.

Training. Teach your dog to wait quietly in the car while you put the leash on. It may take several minutes for your dog to relax. Be patient. Your dog should wait for a release command to come out of the vehicle. An excitable dog that is allowed to bolt from the car is likely to bolt from *any* door *any* time he gets excited. Teach your dog to walk politely on a loose lead before you take your dog to the dog park. A dog who pulls you to the gate is a dog that has been rewarded for pulling. Turn around every time your dog starts to pull. It may take several minutes to get to the gate, but your persistence will pay off in

the long run. Your dog should also have a good understanding of the “Come” command so that you can call him away from potentially hazardous situations before he gets into trouble. Ideally, he should be able to sit, heel, down and stay on command. These commands give you better control and help your dog feel more secure. Your dog will not worry about himself as much when he feels that you are in control, so he will be less likely to react with his instincts when trouble arises. Train your dog to do these basic commands reliably around distractions. Teaching your dog several tricks will help increase your dog’s responsiveness too. A good dog training class can provide you with all the knowledge and tools that your dog will need for life and offers an excellent atmosphere in which to teach your dog to listen around *distractions*. It is frustrating, and sometimes hazardous, chasing a dog around the dog park who doesn’t listen when there’s a crisis or when it’s time to leave. A benefit of a constructive training class environment is that your dog will be less likely to have problems around other dogs.

Preparation. If you are taking more than one dog, it is wise to have one able and knowledgeable person for each dog. Check your dog’s equipment, make sure he has a secure fitting collar with identification and a sturdy six-foot lead. *(There are valid arguments both for and against leaving collars on dogs while they are in dog parks. Dogs have been known to get their teeth caught in the collar of another dog, unable to free themselves. On the other hand, owners have had difficulty regaining control of their dogs when they didn’t have a collar to grasp onto. The decision is ultimately yours. Breakaway safety collars are also available.)* Before you leave home, be sure to have a couple of stool bags in your pocket in case your dog does his business when a bag station isn’t nearby. A personal water bottle or a water bowl in your car will be more sanitary than a community bowl to help prevent your dog from picking up viruses or bacteria from other dogs. Keep a first aid kit in the car for the dog, and it isn’t a bad idea to have one for people too, just in case!

Arrival. It’s a good idea to escort your dog to the dog park on lead, don’t just open the car door and let him take off. If your dog is over-stimulated, don’t release him from the lead. Walk him around first to burn off some of that initial energy and enthusiasm. If the dog park is fenced, let your dog familiarize himself with the other dogs from outside of the fence first. If you see any fence-fighting responses from the dogs inside, come back later when there’s a different mix of dogs. If your dog responds aggressively, it’s time to go back to work on socialization again. If your dog remains calm, walk him into the area on lead using loose lead training until he calms down again. Never let your dog off of his lead if he is over-stimulated, aggressive or fearful!

Observe. Watch all the dogs in your area. Be on the lookout for body language that may be a precursor to trouble. Look for fixed stares, stiff postures, stiff-legged struts, elevated head positions, hackles raised or upright “mechanical” tail wags, as these signs can precipitate a problem. Catching, redirecting or preventing a potential problem is much easier than tackling one that is already in progress. Try a “happy” distraction to see if you can break the cycle, no matter whose dog it is. If you believe a problem may be brewing, call your dog away from it immediately.

Safety. Watch out for ponds where there may be fishing hooks and lines around the shores or in the water. *Avoid areas where people fish!* It is safer for children to remain outside of the fenced areas at dog parks, but if they are allowed in, supervise them very closely. Avoid feeding your dog treats when other dogs are nearby as food can trigger aggressive behavior (some dogs may be on strict diets or have other health issues). Toys can create possessive-aggressive behaviors too, monitor all the dogs in the vicinity for signs of this. Don’t throw sticks or rocks to retrieve as dogs can swallow them, ingest splinters or get the objects lodged in their throats.

Fighting. In spite of everyone’s best efforts, a scrap or a full blown fight may break out and sometimes it can involve a number of dogs. People who run towards the fight screaming are only going to intensify the conflict. Approaches should be made calmly and quietly and every effort should be made to control the instigator first. The other dog(s) may break away if the main instigator is controlled. Attempting to grab a collar in a melee of gnashing teeth is inviting a nasty bite for yourself.

Etiquette.

- Obey posted park rules and clean up after your pet.
- Never bring a female dog in season to the park.
- Respect other handler’s and dog’s spaces.
- Avoid letting your dog bully or rough-house harshly with other dogs.
- If someone else’s dog is creating a problem, ask them to remove their dog. If they don’t cooperate, remove your dog. If *your* dog is the problem, accept responsibility and take your dog out of the area immediately.
- Remember, whatever damage your dog does to property, people or other dogs is *your* responsibility.

Education. Share these tips with other dog owners and help them to become responsible dog handlers too. Together, we can make dog parks a safe and beneficial place to spend time with other dogs and other dog enthusiasts!