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Dog Parks: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

by Trish King, CPDT, CDBC with Terry Long, CPDT

They're called dog parks or dog runs. Sometimes they're official, sometimes they're formed by a group of people who want their dogs to play together. Some dog parks are large—acres or miles of paths—but most are less than an acre in size, and some are tiny. Some are flat gravel or dirt, while others have picnic tables, trees, and other objects.

What all dog parks have in common is the reason for their existence. Dogs (and their owners) need a place where they can run free, sans leashes, and do "doggie" things. Many of their owners have no yards and the dogs would otherwise spend their entire outdoor lives on leash.



Although many dog owners think all play is in good fun at dog parks, some dogs learn bullying play styles that can lead to other problems.

The fact that we even need dog parks is a reflection on American society, which is fragmented, with many people living solitary lives. Dogs and other pets are sometimes the only family an owner has. At the same time, municipal laws have been inexorably pushing dogs further and further away from acceptance in our culture. Thus, they're seen as nuisances by half the population, and as family by the other.

In a perfect world, dog parks would not have to exist. Well-behaved dogs would have the privilege of being off leash (and well mannered!) in many different areas. However, the world is not perfect, and so we must make the best of what we have.

Advantages of Dog Parks

The advantages are simple and powerful. Dog parks provide a safe space in which people can exercise their dogs, and watch them play (something I love to do!) Our culture is becoming less and less tolerant of our canine companions, and often they are not welcome elsewhere

At their best, dog parks can facilitate socialization with a variety of breeds

"A dog park is like a cocktail party, where you don't know anyone and everyone is drunk. You could have fun, but it could be a disaster."

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and breed types. They can be a wonderful resource for adolescent dogs that have too much energy and no place to put it. Many also function as a social center—a place where people gather to chat, to exchange news, and to commiserate with one another's problems. For many, it replaces family conversation and for some, it is their only contact with fellow human beings. This is probably why, when I recommend that a client not visit dog parks, some cannot bring themselves to do it. They miss the camaraderie too much.

Disadvantages of Dog Parks

The disadvantages are not so simple, but can be even more powerful, depending on the dog and its owner. Some of these are exacerbated by the layout of parks (see sidebar, "Keys to Successful Dog Park Design"). The real problems, both short- and long-term, are behavioral. And often, owners unwittingly contribute to these problems because they don't recognize—or don't interpret correctly—what their dogs are actually doing and learning. Some of the problems cause difficulties only when dogs are meeting and interacting with other dogs. Others can cause future behavior to deteriorate. And still others directly impact dog/owner relationships.

Defensive Aggression

Dogs are social animals, but they—like us—tend to like familiar faces. Just as we do not routinely meet and chat with everyone we meet on the street, dogs do not need to meet with all other dogs. It often takes some time for one dog to feel comfortable with another; and they need that time to decide how they should react. As we know, time is not always available in a dog park situation. Thus, even friendly dogs that feel uncomfortable can give people the impression that they are "aggressive," especially when they meet a dog for the first time. If an overly exuberant Labrador Retriever, for instance, approaches a herding mix, the latter dog may snarl or air bite to make the Labrador retreat. After that, as far as the herding dog is concerned, they can meet nicely. However, people are likely to label the herding dog "aggressive," and punish her (or at least ostracize the owner!). This is a bad learning experience all around. The Labrador hasn't learned to inhibit his greeting style—which he would have if he hadn't been interrupted by overreacting humans—and the herding dog has learned that a) normal warnings don't work; and b) her owner won't back her up.



These owners inadvertently communicate to their Chihuahua that he is on his own when he is at the dog park.

Learned Disobedience

When owners are not careful, dog park play quickly teaches a dog that the owner has no control over him. I'm sure we've all seen an owner following her dog, calling vainly as the animal stays just out of range, looks at her from afar, or just totally ignores her. And this is after the dog has learned to bark hysterically in the car all the way to the dog park, followed by pulling the owner through the parking lot, and then bolting away from her as soon as the leash is off.

Owner Helplessness

Dogs learn that their owners cannot keep them safe from harm when owners stand by and allow other dogs to play overly roughly, and to body slam and roll them over. When discussing this point, it's important to understand that the dog's perception of safety matters even more than the human's. This can be difficult for owners, who may dismiss their dog's obvious fear as unwarranted, since they "know" the other dog(s) mean no harm. A dog that is chased or bullied by another dog is not only learning to avoid other dogs, he is also learning that his owner is completely ineffective. The Chihuahua in the photo above may very well be thinking he's destined to be a meal, but his owner doesn't seem concerned. This can have a serious impact on the human-dog relationship.

Problematic Play Styles

Dog play styles can be radically different, and sometimes they are

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not compatible with each other's. This can cause misunderstandings, or even fights, and it can also exacerbate certain play styles. Dogs that tend to be very physical in play often overwhelm other dogs. No one is inhibiting their play style. In fact, owners often laugh at concerns with "don't worry, he's only playing." Playing he may be, but he is also learning, and what he's learning is not necessarily what we want to be teaching. When bully type dogs play with similar dogs, the only unwanted outcome is that they don't learn how to be polite with other dogs. If they bully weaker dogs—which often happens—they learn that they can overpower other dogs, and they tend to repeat the behavior. The weaker dogs learn that cut-off or appeasement signals do not work, and they learn to be afraid of other dogs ... sometimes all other dogs, sometimes just dogs that look like the bullies.

Resource Guarding

Resource guarding can become very problematic in a park, where resources are often few and far between. Some dogs will guard their own toys, some will try to take items from other dogs. Some keep the items, others just want to taunt the dog who "owns" the toy. Squabbles over resources, including humans sitting at a picnic table or on a bench, can easily erupt into nasty fights.

Frustration Aggression

Interestingly enough, leash frustration—a canine temper tantrum—is sometimes an offshoot of dog park experiences. There are a couple of reasons for this. Leash frustration often begins when a dog is so excited at the prospect of playing that he pulls his owner all the way to the park, lunging and barking—sometimes for blocks. His agitated owner pulls back and yells at the dog, thus increasing the arousal. By the time the dog gets to the park, he's all fired up for something very physical—like a fight.

Leash frustration also occurs because dogs that frequent parks mistakenly believe that they can meet any other dog they see. Once again, when thwarted, they tend to pull on the leash, and the owner yanks back. As the frustration builds, the dog appears to be aggressive, thus causing other owners to pull their dogs back in fear. Eventually, leash frustration can lead to real aggression. Often, owners of these dogs will be very confused because their dogs are so good off leash, and holy terrors on leash.

Facilitated Aggression

Many dogs are very attached to their owners, and will hang around near them. Often these dogs are worried about, or afraid of, other dogs, and will growl or display their teeth when they're approached. The owners unwittingly "facilitate" this behavior by remaining next to their dog, who then counts on them to help if a fight ensures. If this behavior is repeated often enough —if they feel threatened by a variety of dogs—they may default to that behavior.

Another form of facilitated aggression occurs when two or more dogs in a family visit the dog park. The two may well gang up on a third dog, possibly frightening him or her—or worse.

Age

While many dogs enjoy playing with others throughout their life, a substantial number do not, once

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The entrance to a dog park is where a lot of problems occur. Too many dogs converge on the newcomer, who sometimes resorts to aggression when faced with the inappropriate greeting styles of the dogs at the gate.

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they have reached social maturity. These dogs will slowly lose interest in other dogs, and may signal them to go away. Some dogs become very reluctant to go into dog parks, which—as we have noted—can be out of control. Others will snarl or snap to indicate their displeasure.

Arousal

Dogs playing in parks sometimes are unable to calm down, and some can get into a state of sustained arousal that gets them into trouble. A dog that has been involved in an incident in which the excitement level is very high, might inappropriately and uncharacteristically start other incidents, often with unwanted outcomes.

Trauma

Finally, a traumatic experience can make an impact on a young dog that cannot be fully understood nor erased. A puppy or adolescent who is attacked may well show aggressive behaviors that begin after that incident. Sometimes a young dog can be traumatized by what the owners think are minor events. I liken that kind of trauma to that suffered by a child who is traumatized, perhaps by getting stuck in an elevator. After the first experience, all elevators are bad—even though she knows intellectually that all elevators are not bad. Pity the poor puppy, who doesn't have the reasoning to know that what occurred once does not always happen again.

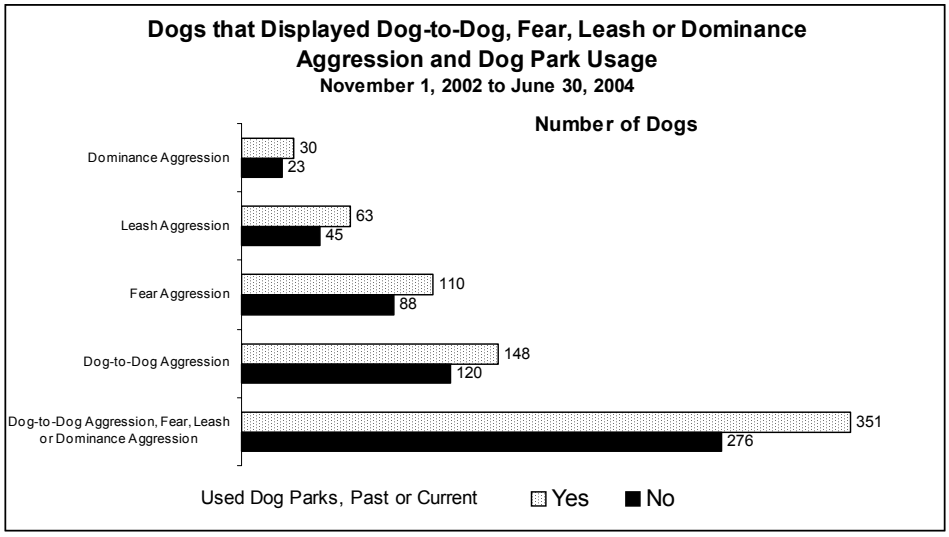
The Power of Knowledge

Owners, of course, play an important role in dog parks, and often don't accept the responsibility they should. Many don't pay attention to their dog, and many have no idea what constitutes proper behavior, or what a dog may be signaling to another dog. Some defend their dogs when the animal exhibits poor or inappropriate behavior. Some overreact to a normal interaction, in which one dog discourages the attention of another. Occasionally, some owners use parks as babysitters, even leaving their dogs unattended while they shop. And most owners have far less control over their dogs than they believe!

Educating owners is a tough job. Many believe firmly that they are socializing their dogs in the proper way, and don't like suggestions that they limit dog park time or monitor their dog and others. Teaching them what good play looks like is a first step, and empowering them to actually interrupt poor interactions is a necessary second step. Often, people don't want to offend other dog owners, so they allow poor behavior to continue.

Trainers can help them learn by describing what appropriate interactions look like, possibly by narrating what the dogs are doing as two dogs play. I've found that owners really enjoy learning what good play manners are like—they appreciate the same kinds of descriptions that they hear from sports announcers during games.

Finally, some dogs should not go to dog parks. They can be too shy, too bold, too defensive, or have tendencies to guard toys and balls. Often, when consulting with clients, I ask them to consider giving parks a pass and concentrating on walks or runs, either alone or maybe with some special friends. I'm occasionally surprised by the relief these people feel when they find out dog park play is not mandatory! They thought they had to do it.



Author Trish King has collected from the Marin County Humane Society's clientele information regarding their dogs' behavior problems and those same clients' use of dog parks. This chart shows some interesting trends, suggesting that more study may be indicated to determine if dog parks are contributing to some dogs' aggression.

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A common mistake seen frequently at dog parks is owners who fail to supervise their dogs' play. Here, owners chat while the dog on the left is clearly not comfortable with the black dog's approach.

Keys to Successful Dog Park Design

- Entrance and/or exit: Double gates for safety; visually shielded from dogs that are already in the park to avoid. Two or three entrances are preferable. Dogs tend to gather at entrances and exits, arousal goes up, and incidents can easily occur.
- Size: As large as possible. At least an acre, preferably not a square piece of land, but one that is oddly shaped. Ponds or lakes are preferable (at least from the play point of view, if not from the owners'!)
- Contour/topography: Hillocks or trees to block dogs from racing towards each other and body slamming or muzzle bumping each other.
- Structures: Tough obstacle equipment, hiding places for frightened dogs, other view-blocking structures if hills and trees aren't available.

Behavioral Tips For Dog Park Attendees

Do	Don't
• Check out the entrance before entering to make sure dogs aren't congregating there.	• Allow your dog to enter the park if there is a "gang" right next to the entrance.
• Pay close attention to their dog's play style, interrupting play if necessary to calm their dog down.	• Believe that dogs can "work it out" if you just let them do so.
• Move around the park so that their dog needs to keep an eye on them.	• Congregate at a picnic table or other area and chat with dog owners without watching their own dog.
• Remove their dog if the dog appears afraid.	• Let their frightened dog remain in the park and hope things get better.
• Remove their dog if it is bullying others.	• Listen to other attendees in the park, who may not understand their dog's needs.
• Respect their dog's wish to leave.	• Assume a dog is aggressive when it is only trying to communicate its discomfort.
• Leave special toys at home to avoid resource guarding problems.	