

No Dog Parks For Me and Mine

By Jill Kessler-Miller, Grad. Cert., CPDT

I don't recommend dog parks. The list of things that can go wrong is so long that it completely outweighs the possible attributes; note I say "possible," because the positives are, in my opinion, only theoretical and are rarely actually to be had.

Dog parks are rife with disease, especially giardia. Soft stool, diarrhea that comes and goes, horrible gas? Have your vet test for giardia. And then, of course, there's kennel cough and other viruses, such as parvo and canine papilloma, and upper respiratory diseases and gastrointestinal bacteria, as well other fleas, fungi and worms and a bevy of parasites.

I have seen way, way too many dog bites that have occurred at dog parks for my personal comfort. Mostly to other dogs, but also to people who reach in to break up a dog-fight, or to grab their dog out of harm's way. Even though signage clearly says "Enter at your own risk" and admonishes entrants that the liability they're undertaking is their own, lawsuits more than often ensue. They're never simple, they're always stressful and it may threaten your homeowner's insurance coverage in the future.

But let's look at it from a dog's point of view. Dogs thrive on stable relationships. Notice I did not say "pack!" They set up and like to maintain relationships with entities that they know: their people, our human friends, their dog friends, their housemates, etc. Unless there are the exact same dogs every time they go to the dog park (which is nearly impossible), they have to re-establish their relationships with not only the dogs they already know in context of the new dog present, but they also have to establish a relationship with that specific new dog. Some dogs can handle the stress of this--but most cannot. Thus you'll get what appears to be random fighting, random aggression towards a dog they know, random odd behaviors ("gee, never done that before"), seemingly sudden guarding behaviors (territory, owner, another dog), etc. It's not random or unpredictable--it's displaced behaviors stemming from the stress of going to the dog park! Dog parks require skills that most dogs

do not possess, nor would they according to how we have bred them for hundreds of years.

The main reason I'm not a dog park advocate is that I can't control my dog's experience and/or other people's dogs (and I think it goes without saying, the dog owners). Because dogs are learning all the time, I must control as much of their experiences as possible, so that they build a solid foundation of behaviors that are appropriate and desirable, such as compliance to me at all times, impulse control and bite inhibition; I want dogs under my jurisdiction to exchange as many rewarding, positive, social interactions as possible, and to slowly build tolerance to irritating situations, which real life will throw at them in spades.

All mammals remember frightening encounters over non-eventful or even fun encounters. It's a primal survival brain mechanism, designed to keep us alive. Dozens of positive encounters can be overridden by one bad one; thus I must make sure my dog has only positive experiences for months, possibly even years depending on the dog's innate temperament. Once they are mature and have a solid foundation, I begin to expose them to possibly unsure environments where they must rely upon previous experiences and decisions for reference.

If your dog gets bullied, attacked, frightened or even just overwhelmed at the dog park, he will bring that experience and the subsequent conclusions he made with him everywhere. The reactions can vary from "I'm scared and must get away as quickly as possible at all costs" to "If I come on strong and attack first, maybe I'll be okay," to just about anything in between.

Keep in mind that fighting and bullying in dogs falls into being a learned behavior after just a few incidents (or even just one). It quickly becomes habit and a "go-to" solution for the dog. And make no mistake--many dogs enjoy being a jerk! Your best bet is to not let it happen in the first place, whether it's your dog being the bully or being the target. At dog parks, there is no control over this very important factor.

So considering all the above, is this something you actually want for your dog? I doubt it!

Am I recommending never allowing dog-to-dog play? Of course not! Well-matched dogs playing together is a beautiful, joyful thing to behold. But it must be done with intelligence. If your dog has a few friends that he or she really enjoys, please go for it! Set up play dates, meet somewhere where they can safely run, sprint, wrassle, and jump about. If you're a trainer and have a large safe space, setting up scheduled play time with interviewed and cleared dogs is a wonderful way to allow dog-dog socialization, connect with your clients, and send a happy tired dog home with grateful owners. Since dogs generally play in pairs, try for either just two dogs or in even numbers, you'll find it works out better. Some dogs only want or need a few friends (just like people), and some are social butterflies, and can make friends wherever they go. Pay attention to who your dog is, not who you want them to be. Stay within your dog's comfort zone, and you'll have a happier, safer dog.

I'm very wary of the "unknown" factors. Unknown dogs, unknown owners, unknown relationships and interactions, unknown damages. I don't like surprises, and dog parks hold way too many unknown factors for dogs' safety. They can result in hurt dogs, hurt people and irreparable psychological damage to a dog. Inter-dog play, with supervision and forethought is desirable, but you'll have to go out of way to make it happen. I promise it's worth it!

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