

Whole Dog Journal™



The Pros and Cons of Dog Parks

Dog park benefits include providing a place to run and play off-leash - an outlet for your dog's overabundant energy. Dog parks can also be places where dogs get to practice undesirable social behavior and develop bad etiquette.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

In recent years, more and more dog training and behavior professionals are speaking out against dog parks - yes, those safely fenced, community-funded spaces where dogs and their humans can get together and have a good time. What's not to like?

If you ask almost any trainer, she will likely say, "Plenty!" As dog parks have become more common (and, indeed, as dog ownership has been on the rise in the past decade) they have somehow morphed from being something that local dog owners band together and fight to build, to places where few really knowledgeable owners care to take their dogs. It seems everyone has a horror story to tell about "that day at the dog park," featuring overstimulated dogs running amok, dogs practicing bully behaviors, dog fights, and even dog deaths.



This is the dog-park dream: Exuberant dogs running and playing with joyous abandon, then coming home with you tired and content. But anyone who has spent much time at a dog park can attest that it's only sometimes like this; just as often, one can see unhappy, anxious dogs, dogs being targeted by "playground bullies," and even dog fights.

It's true that all of those horrible things can happen at dog parks, but a lot of good things happen in dog parks, too, especially when they are well-constructed and well-managed, and when park users are smart about bringing appropriate dogs to the park and providing adequate supervision. Dog parks are a lifesaver for the owners of many dogs who need a little extra exercise and outdoor stimulation in order to be able to relax and behave well at home.

So do you take your dog to your local dog park or not? How do you know if you should? Or shouldn't? Just as with so many other dog training and behavior questions, it depends!

7 Things to Consider About Dog Parks

There are a number of factors that determine whether a dog park is a good choice for your canine companion:

1. How your dog prefers to play.

Does your dog love to play with other dogs? Not all dogs do. Yes, they are a social species; that doesn't mean they all get along. We humans are also a social species, and we certainly don't get along with all humans!

If your dog is a confident, social butterfly, she might be a good dog park candidate. If she's fearful around other dogs, she will be much happier not going to the park. (Consider, too, that her fear will likely deepen with every bad experience.) Some dogs are perfectly content with a small circle of intimate canine friends. Other dogs prefer the company of their human companions over any other canines. Bringing a dog who doesn't enjoy the company of other dogs into an off-leash playground isn't fair to your dog or any others who may approach her.

2. Your dog's play style.

You need some awareness of what sort of play best suits your dog in order to gauge whether a particular park at a particular time of day is likely to provide her with an enjoyable play session or set her up to be traumatized (or traumatize others). Consider what your dog likes to do, and plan accordingly.

For example: Is your dog a fetchaholic? If her preference is to chase balls in a huge open space without being chased or pestered by any other dogs, bringing her to a cramped or crowded park might just set her up to snap at any unwary dog who gets in her way or tries to compete for the ball.

Consider the other typical dog park visitors, too. Does your dog love to play with other rowdy, rough-and-tumble brawlers at the park? That's great if you can meet up with folks whose dogs enjoy that, too. But if your dog overwhelms other park visitors with his level of energy and arousal, it's not fair to inflict your dog's inappropriate play on them. Other dogs (and their owners) will not care that your dog is "just playing" if, while minding their own business, they get bowled over and hurt; they may respond with a dramatic protest and trigger an aggressive retort from the over-aroused roughouser.

3. How much training your dog has.

To be fair to other park users, and in order to be able to keep your own dog safe, your dog should at least have a dynamite recall so you can call her back to you when you see trouble brewing. A full range of well-trained good manners behaviors is even better!

4. How your local dog park is constructed.

There are dog parks, and then there are dog parks. A well-constructed dog park is several acres or larger, solidly fenced, ideally with amenities that include water, equipment to play on, and varied terrain, such as open fields, creeks, and woods, so dogs have plenty to keep them environmentally engaged, rather than just pestering each other. Parks that are small, overcrowded and boring greatly increase the likelihood of inappropriate canine behavior (fights). Other important park features include separate areas for small and large dogs and double-gated entrances so dogs can't escape as newcomers arrive.



5. How your local dog park is managed.

Every good dog park needs rules and someone to enforce them. Municipal parks, usually under the auspices of the parks and recreation department, may fall short on management. Rarely is there someone in attendance to deal with conflicts that may arise. City and county dog parks often compete with tennis courts, ball fields, playgrounds, and picnic areas for park staff attention.

Privately owned dog parks are more likely to have staff in attendance to assist in a timely manner with conflict resolution (canine and human) and enforcement of rules. Some parks require registration and issue numbered arm bands that owners must wear while in the park, for more effective reporting and investigation of problems.



6. The way your dog park is maintained.

Dog fights aren't the only threat to your dog's safety at a park. Poorly maintained fences and equipment can injure and kill dogs as easily as dog-dog altercations. Grass should be regularly mowed, and needed repairs promptly and routinely made. Make sure your park is getting its fair share of the park-maintenance budget!

7. Your local dog park culture.

This is the human side of things. If most owners are chatting with each other or on cell phones, rather than supervising their dogs' activities, there are bound to be problems. If owners are oblivious to their dogs' inappropriate behavior and allow mounting, bullying, and aggression to go uninterrupted, it's not a healthy place for you and your dog to hang out.

Consider visiting the park on different days and at different times of the day; there may be knowledgeable and more engaged owners gathering at a different time.



Dog Park Opinions from Professional Trainers

We asked several of our favorite dog training and behavior professionals how they feel about dog parks.

Kelly Fahey, PMCT2
The DogSmith of Hunterdon, Pittstown, New Jersey

“I love the concept of dog parks. They sound great; you get to take your dogs to run and play. They get to meet and make doggie friends. What a wonderful way to obtain much-needed exercise for your dog and to keep your dog socialized.

“Peel back the curtain and you find it’s not what it seems. My clients have told me about so many bad experiences – things that impacted their dogs and things that they’ve seen happen. My clients who have been involved in some sort of incident at a dog park often feel like it was their fault, as if they did something wrong. They are relieved to learn that it wasn’t necessarily their fault, that the environment isn’t usually stacked in their favor. I explain why I’m not a fan of dog parks, and suggest alternatives such as walking on the many trails that we have out here in the country.

“A dog was killed at one of our local dog parks this year. There was a breach in the fence that you couldn’t really see. There was brush and some other greenery covering it. The dog got out and ran into the road.”

Alex Bond***YTiny Pets Dog Training and Walking, Annapolis, Maryland***

"I want so badly for dog parks to be good but I consider them to be such an uncontrolled gamble. I always suggest they be avoided. Things go bad so fast, unless you have a regular, familiar group playing together. You can try to stay aware and leave if problems arise, but in my experience, problems come in the gate and happen before you can react. People and dogs are harmed, and often the wrong dogs are blamed. The parks are a risk I've deemed unworthy except in extraordinary circumstances."

Cindy Mauro, CPDT-KA***Cindy Mauro Dog Training, West Milford, New Jersey***

"I don't recommend that people to go to dog parks. I have witnessed fights – and no one knew what to do. I've also observed people on their phones and not paying attention to their dogs. That said, people need a way to exercise their energetic dogs, and they may not have a lot of options. In these cases, I explain to them the importance of watching what is going on, much as you would a child in a playground. I go over the warning signs that things aren't going well, and how to know when it's time to get your dog and leave. You have to pay attention to the surroundings and act as your dog's advocate."

Susan Kaminsky, CPDT-KA, PMCT***The Country Dog, LLC, Norwalk, Connecticut***

"Dog parks are sometimes good but often ugly. My Collie Zig Zag loved socializing with every human in the park. My Collie Maddie would happily run and play and fetch sticks, but was once attacked by two small dogs. Although she reacted appropriately – with lots of noise so it sounded scary – she was blamed. And I once saw two intact Bulldogs attack an elderly Golden Retriever. My local park is considering registering dogs and separating the small dogs."

Susan Sanderson, PMCT-2***Your Dog's Friend in Arlington, Virginia, and Joyful Dog in Leesburg, Virginia***

"One of my clients lives with his adolescent Lab in a tiny basement apartment in Washington, D.C. He knew the dog park had risks, but he felt it was the only way to regularly get his dog the exercise she needed. We had discussed things like going to empty fields and using a long-line as well as hiking on the weekends and playing lots of brain games, but he really wanted to be able to do the dog park thing a few times a week.

"We agreed that if he could commit to a few things – such as training a great recall, understanding what his responsibilities were at the park, and getting better at reading other dogs' body language – we could work on getting them as prepared as possible. He worked like a fiend on his dog's recall, and when I went to the park with them after a few months, he could call that dog off of anything and everything. He also has made a super effort to learn more about dog body language and I saw him watching everything like a hawk. But I think he's the outlier!"

Lisa Marino, CPDT-KA, PMCT, KPA-CTP***Head of the Class Dog Training LLC, Winchester, Virginia***

“One way dog owners can make the dog park a better experience is to not allow their dogs to congregate at entrances and exits. Often, owners let their dogs excitedly rush up to any new dog who comes in. If everyone called their dogs back so the new guy could come in and be released, they could greet more naturally instead of a mob scene.

“Another way to make the park experience better is to keep moving with the dogs. Instead of standing around in clumps, walk the perimeter and encourage your dog to sniff and run with you or near you. Encourage your dog to run off and play and romp briefly, come back, go away again – and keep moving. Often, if the owners keep moving, the dogs will, too.



“I do have some clients who use dog parks successfully. Some use the park before anyone else comes. As soon as someone else pulls into the parking area, they leash up their dogs and leave.”

Bob Ryder, PMCT-3, CPDT-KA
Pawsitive Transformations, Bloomington, Illinois

“In a perfect world, dog parks would be staffed with ‘lifeguards’ who are skillful at interpreting canine body language and coaching handlers when/how to intervene before problems get out of hand. I’d love to see privately owned dog parks where people can bring their dogs for a modest fee and agree in advance to rules for visiting the park. Short of that, I recommend prearranged play dates with dogs who are well-known and possess good social skills.”

Jackie Moyano, CPDT-KA, PMCT
Coventry School for Dogs, Columbia, Maryland, and Humane Rescue Alliance, Washington, D.C.

“I encourage clients to create small neighborhood dog play dates, like the one we call Lunch Bunch in my neighborhood. We rotate to different backyards with the same group of dogs throughout the week. Sometimes we walk them in the woods. We know the play styles, quirks, and health status of all the dogs.”

Check It Out

If you are confident that your dog is a good dog park candidate, ask some trusted, knowledgeable friends and your favorite canine professionals if they agree. If so, first visit parks in your area without your dog to check out the facilities and culture. Make several trips at various times so you get a real feel for the park and its users. If you like what you see after multiple visits, then you are ready to take your dog for playtime in the park.

Remember to supervise your dog responsibly while you are there, and always be ready to leave if you see things happening that make you or your dog uncomfortable.

DOG PARKS: OVERVIEW

1. Evaluate your dog carefully and honestly before taking her to a dog park.

- 2. Consider your dog-park choices thoroughly before taking your dog there.**
- 3. Discuss the pros and cons of your area dog parks with your favorite local dog training and behavior professional(s).**
- 4. Consider alternatives to dog parks, such as getting together with other dog owners in your area and creating compatible playgroups that meet in fenced backyards.**

Author Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, of Fairplay, Maryland, is WDJ's Training Editor. Miller is also the author of many books on positive training. Her newest is Beware of the Dog: Positive Solutions for Aggressive Behavior in Dogs.

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Comments (6)

Another risk of dog parks is the whacko, mental person who will give poisoned treats to dogs, which has happened a couple of times in the last few years here in the Seattle area. Don't let anyone you don't know and trust give your dog any food!

Posted by: Natalie H. | December 31, 2017 3:06 PM

PS

The only problem is how many people don't know the difference between dogs fighting and dogs playing.

Posted by: Bullseye | December 31, 2017 1:16 PM

Us average normal pet owners with 17 years experience bringing Pitt bulls to our local dog park find most of what you recommend we don't have or don't do. We and our dogs have enjoyed the dog park emensely.

Other dog owners there are similar to us. There has never been a problem. Our dogs aren't angels with dynamite recall.

I just think the whole article was overkill.

Posted by: Bullseye | December 31, 2017 1:08 PM

We've been going to dog parks for 9 years, different dog parks in different locations. The key to a good experience is, supervise, supervise, supervise. Keep your eyes on your dog(s) and the dogs around them. Intervene before things go bad. Leave if another owner won't control their rude or aggressive dog. My boys are on the older side now, while they are ALWAYS excited to go to the park, once there they mostly just hang out, walk around, run a little, then hang by us. Since they still enjoy it, we take them. There's no guarantee anywhere you go that your dog is going to be 100% safe.

Posted by: puppypig | December 31, 2017 11:30 AM

My city just opened its first dog park. Already people are upset about age limits for children and I've seen 2 dogs in there with prong collars on (despite the rule of taking off prong collars). Neither of my dogs enjoys a dog park. Our American Bulldog reacts badly when dogs rush up to him and our Sheltie mix is scared of strange people.

Posted by: Janice Z | December 31, 2017 10:38 AM

I know my GSD is reactive, prey-driven and should not be off-leash with other dogs. So as much as I'd love to have her interact, I'm okay with avoiding the off-leash area. What drives me crazy are the dog owners who feel that any piece of grass is off-leash and their dogs are running around, away from that off-leash park. The limited, small areas I can take my dog on-leash so we can enjoy some time off a sidewalk without any stress is getting harder and harder. As always, ignorant owners, not ignorant pets will get away with it every time!

Posted by: LoveGSDs | December 31, 2017 9:55 AM