

Dog Parks: The Good the Bad and the Ugly

Dog parks, visions of dogs running leaping and playing with other dogs on fresh green grass and golden rays of the sun shining down. This is what we picture. But is it the truth? This article will discuss some of the pros and cons of dog parks and whether or not you should take your dog to one.

First of all there are specific rules posted at most dog parks: clean up after your dog, pay attention to your dog, dogs that are aggressive must be removed, etc. Unfortunately some people do not follow the rules, or understand dog behavior enough to know when or if their dog should be removed.

Go to a dog park and just watch from outside the fence. Watch the humans. MOST of them are sitting in groups, looking at their cell phones, and not even paying attention to their dogs. They only look up when they hear a "fight" and then they yell out "oh he's only playing!" I have seen many dog fights that could have been stopped if only the owner was paying attention and told his dog to back off a bit from another dog. I have seen and also been a victim of not only dog bullies but of human bullies in the dog park.

Dogs have different "play styles" and when a dog wants to wrestle with a dog whose play style is more of a run and chase, these dogs may not play together well. Some dogs may be timid or shy, or even have health issues such as arthritis that make it uncomfortable or even painful with full contact play. But these dogs also have a right to the "playground" and should be able to have the benefit of running off leash and playing with other dogs. Dogs that have stayed with their littermates long enough know the full scope of dog language and interaction. But unfortunately we take dogs away from that environment at 8 weeks (or even younger) and that just is not long enough to learn the whole scope of dog language. When a timid dog gives the "cues" to the rough dog that he doesn't want to wrestle (maybe lets just run together till I get to know you better) but the rough dog doesn't listen, the timid dog may have to get a little more serious by snapping. This can sometimes escalate into a dog fight if the rough dog either misinterprets the signal or has behavior issues and decides to

fight back. Now we have a dog fight. One that could have been avoided if the owners were watching and knew dog language and took some control. Think of it this way: we would never allow a child on a playground to bully our kid, but in dog parks it happens all the time and humans call it play. It is not. It is BULLYING. And can cause serious lifelong damage physically or emotionally to a dog.

The next issue I have is a pretty obvious one, the potential for illness. I have seen so many sick dogs at the park. Vomiting, diarrhea, mite infestations, worms, you name it I have probably seen it and I always ask "why is he here if he is sick?" and I always get the same sort of answer "oh we dont have a yard and he has to go out." If your dog is sick do not take him to the park. In fact, even after some vaccinations your dog should stay home because they can "shed" the virus used to make the vaccine to other dogs and actually get them sick. Plus the amount of dog poop in a dog park can be pretty high even if you dont see it. Ever smell a dog park after a warm summer rain? Smells awful!

But is there anything good about dog parks? Yes. Dog parks are great socializing and training tools if used properly. I use them all the time. But I do NOT take the dog inside the park. I work with the dog on leash OUTSIDE the park. This helps to socialize the dog and also helps him to learn to ignore other dogs.

If you really want to go in, first watch the humans and the dogs. If the humans are walking around with their dogs and playing with them, and all the dogs seem calm and polite and focusing on their owners in between some playing with each other, it MIGHT be safe to enter. But stay close to your dog. And you need to be an advocate for your dog. Do not let the other dogs all swarm your dog at once, its ok to push them away. Ask the other owners to hold their dogs away from the gate when entering so your dog isnt so overwhelmed when entering. And if a dog is being rude to your dog stop it immediately! Learn to read your dog's signals for when he doesnt like what is being done and get in between him and the other dog. Face the other dog and sternly tell him to "back off!" and let your dog know you "have his back." Or better yet, just leave.

What to do instead of going to the dog park? Take a hike in the woods. And dont just hike together, EXPLORE that different environment together! Jump up on and

walk on logs, climb up rocks, jump a stream, dig in the dirt together. Or get a long training line and learn to use it safely and take your dog to an open field and play with him. Develop your relationship with your dog through good play (and some trick training) so your dog prefers to play with YOU rather than other dogs. Do enough with your dog that a dog park becomes boring.

Prepared by C4C Canine Program Team for use by C4C Members.