

Dog Parks
Karen Peak
West Wind Dog Training

Ahhhhh, Dog Parks, touted by so many as the ideal place for dogs to be dogs, owners to meet and greet, open space in otherwise crowded areas for man's best friend. Dog parks, others call them great places for fights, illness and lawsuits. What is the truth? It lies somewhere in between, with your individual dog and you. Dog parks offer a great opportunity for dogs to socialize, burn off energy and learn about their own species. Sadly, far too many dogs are socially retarded when it comes to other dogs and interacting with humans outside the family. Dog parks tend to have people who do not mind muddy paws on them, who will understand when an owner tries to teach manners, and, in general, are more tolerant. However, dog parks are high stress environments. Socially delayed dogs, one who are easily stressed, have confidence issues; control freaks, etc, and may not be able to handle the issues a dog park has may be visits parks just as easily as a dog who is easy going and unflappable. The constant turn over of dogs, hierarchy changes, the noise, running, smells, fewer resources shared among many dogs may be a trigger for escalating stress and eventually, fights. Many dog owners assume their dogs will do fine at a dog park or if their dog has socializing issues, that a dog park will be a magic pill and cure the dog. So, how can we keep dog parks safer? First, we need to determine if our dog is cut out for a park.

What is the best dog for a dog park? There is none. There is no perfect breed or dog for a park. Dogs are living creatures and not programmable computers. They have good and bad days, likes and dislikes. Each breed has different inherent drives and within breeds, individual dogs will have higher or lower drives than average. In order to be able to handle the stresses of a dog park, a dog needs to be well trained and socialized. It is important to know the drives behind a breed then how your dog works within those expectations. Is your dog of a breed known to be more dog aggressive, hair trigger when it comes to chasing, known for being scrappy or take charge? How does your dog fall in the realm of what is the norm for his breed? Many dogs will not necessarily start an incident, but who is to know what they will perceive as a challenge? A dog has to be very tolerant of the antics of other dogs, people and easy going. You must have good physical and voice control over your dog. My personal opinion is if the ONLY way you can control your dog is through training aids such as head halters and prong collars, the dog is not ready for a dog park. You do not have enough control. If your dog does not respond when called especially if there is a lot of distraction, does not know a cue to leave something alone, has possession issues, low tolerance levels, or fear issues, he is not a candidate for dog parks. I would never bring a Fila Brasileiro or Tosa to a dog park. However, there are people who would. I would not bring a Chihuahua to a dog park due to the sheer size, but I have seen it. I have seen wonderful pit bulls and horrible Labs at dog parks. There is no best dog for a dog park; there are only dogs that may be better suited depending on what is occurring that day with the dog and the park.

How do you know if your dog may be appropriate for a dog park? If your dog can handle being bumped, jostled, crowded by other dogs, grabbed at by animals and people, who will not fight over toys, treats or water, who is slow to rile up, responsive to you during times of high stress/distraction/activity, who can handle life as it happens, does well in groups of dogs that are variable, then try a dog park. If not, work with your dog or completely avoid them and find other alternatives. Under no circumstances should you bring a dog new to your home to a dog park. When I used to frequent parks, I have actually spoken with people who literally came straight from the shelter to the park! They did not know the dogs and were already placing them in high

anxiety situations. I have spoken with people who had dog aggressive dogs or dogs that are high stress and excessively reactive to stimuli trying to break the dogs of it like they saw a trainer in TV do. The owners chose a dog park to mimic what they saw. Saturation can make behaviors worse in the end. It takes a dog that is sound and solid to handle a dog park. If possible, visit the dog park off peak hours, especially the first few times. Shoving a dog not used to crowds of dogs into a mix of a couple dozen dogs or more is courting trouble. Try to go when there are a few dogs and things are less stressing. The hour or two before and after work are often the busiest. Lunch times may be a bit busier. Weekend usage will vary so get to know your individual park.

You must remember that just because your dog gets along with the other dogs in the house or neighbor's dogs, does not mean he will get along at a dog park. For example, my Great Pyrenees, a breed generally NOT recommended by good breeders or rescues for dog parks, was fine at parks as long as she was the tallest dog there. She did not mind dogs coming and going, ignored bratty dogs, however, when I saw the Scottish Deerhounds approach, I would call her back and we would leave. She would go on alert when she saw the dogs and monitor their every move. Another more graphic illustration came from a Great Pyrenees rescue group. An owner, against the recommendation of the rescue, insisted on taking his dog to parks. Quickly, the dog would start to patrol and mark. Over time, the dog began to treat the park as his own turf. Soon, he began attacking dogs that entered after he arrived. Dogs that were there before he arrived were fine, but dogs entering were not. When the dog was adopted, the owner was told not to bring the dog to parks and why. The owner assumed because his dog was fine with neighboring dogs that he would do well at a park. The dog was returned for fighting at the park. So you think your dog is ready for a park, you must put safety as your top priority.

Dog park safety begins before you enter the park. Again, if you have no control over your dog without the use of a head halter or prong, if he does not respond to you under high stress/distraction, your dog needs more work before entering a dog park. You need to be able to safely walk your dog in and out, call away from potentially dangerous situations and be able to get him out of there fast if needed. Many dogs learn to pull into prongs and will hurt themselves to get back to the fracas. A dog lunging against a head halter can do damage to his neck. Head halters and prongs take longer to put on than snapping a leash to a collar or even making a quick noose of the lead and walking a dog away. There are those who disagree with me. However, there is a difference between using a tool to increase your control over a dog in situations where you are not sure about yet and using one to control your dog because it is the ONLY way you can remotely handle the dog.

When approaching a dog park, a dog should be on a lead of no more than six feet and not at the end of it. The further away a dog is from you, the less control you have. What if your dog is at the end of a retractable leash (15 – 25' away) and you cannot get him to reel in and someone approaches with a dog also on a retractable lead? Neither of you have good control over your dogs. I have no issue with these leads used under certain circumstances, but dog parks are NOT these times.

Before you enter the park, stop and observe. Look for issues going on before you enter. Are there large packs of dogs racing wildly after a single dog? It is common for scuffs and even all out fights to occur with dogs in the heat of a chase. It is a small step from a chase to a hunt, from jostling another dog out of position to a brawl. Is there one dog hovering over the water bowls and not happy when other dogs approach? Are there owners playing fetch with dogs that are obsessing over the ball – especially if you have a ball-obsessed dog? Are there any dogs getting “in the face” of other dogs with their tails way up, hackles up, ears pitched forward? Are there any dogs cowering away and trying to escape the throng? These are just a few warning signs to

look for. Each of these scenarios could fast escalate into a fight. A rule of thumb – if in doubt of anything you see, do not visit the park at that point. It is better to be safe than sorry and even sued.

Never take your lead off before you enter the park. Even if there is an “air lock” (double gate) to enter, make sure your dog is safely behind BOTH gates before that lead comes off. If there is another unleashed dog in the air lock, do not enter until the dog is safely leashed and out of the “air lock.” Expect when you enter the park that a horde of dogs will greet yours. Watch the dogs as you enter. If you see any starting to snarl and snap at each other in anticipation of your dog entering or your dog goes on alert with hackles up and teeth bared, leave. Walk about a little, see if the horde relaxes and/or your dog settles, then return. If the situation(s) persist, instead of entering, just go for a nice walk.

While at the park, supervise, supervise, and supervise. I cannot emphasize this enough. Watch not only your dog but also the dogs around yours. I have seen everything from owners congregating in corners and never looking at the dogs again to people dropping dogs off and go outside the area for some reason. Watch the body language of the other dogs for changes in intensity of play, going from appearing laidback to ears pinned, dogs acting “snarky” over a ball or treat. A dog starting to hover over water bowls or a toy and driving others away or a dog ignoring “back off” signals from other dogs must be addressed immediately. If an owner has his/her back turned to the dogs, is plugged into an I-pod or cell phone or even worse, watching the dogs and ignoring worrisome, behaviors, get out of there. Sadly, if you own “certain breeds” or dogs that look a “certain” way, even if your dog was not the instigator, someone will spin and incident to your dog being the cause. Many owners just do not see or want to understand how the behaviors of their dogs can bring out the “beast” in even the most tolerant animal.

What should happen if a fight ensues? First is try to remain as calm as possible. Screaming and yelling can cause the fight to escalate. Second, there is no 100% safe way to break up a fight. Some are better than others are. Never, if possible, try to break one up alone. If there is water about, you can try to see if a good dousing will startle the dogs into stopping. Banging two metal pans together may help as well – especially if the dogs are not “serious” about the fight. One of the worst things you can do is get between two fighting dogs, grabs collars and try to pull apart; you are likely to be bitten. If your dog is NOT one of the ones involved with the fight, you must immediately get your dog restrained. The last thing you need is your dog adding to the fracas or becoming involved in another fight secondary to the first. If your dog is involved in the fight, no matter how sweet and loving he is at home, he is now fighting, adrenaline is rushing and he may as willingly bite you as he is biting the other dog. So, how do you pull two dogs apart? Try what is commonly called the wheelbarrow technique. Grab the dogs (or the aggressor if one dog is down) by the rear legs lift and pull back. Dogs are strong so hold tight. Keep moving in a circle so the dog cannot wheel around as effectively and try to nail the holder in his possible desire to get back to the fight or in his panic to escape. (Dogs who are afraid will fight if needed).

Other people may advise use of a breaking stick. This is basically a lever inserted into a dog’s mouth to pry loose the hold on another dog. If you are not certain how to use this and have help, you put yourself at greater risk; you are at mouth level with hands close to the line of attack. Remember, fighting dogs may not even be aware of who they are going after, they are hyped up and just going.

Once apart, if possible, get a leash around the dog just in front of the hind legs. Get the dogs apart and out of the park fast. BOTH dogs need to leave. If they are just separated until they appear settled and then released, chances are greater that the dogs will go back to fighting. If one dog

stays, he is in a heightened state and more likely to scuff with other dogs. Again, never grab a dog by the collar or lift the front end. Get the dogs to the respective vehicles, call animal control, and get information of the other dog owners and witnesses. The best thing to do is stop trouble before it starts. If you see anything that looks like trouble brewing, get your dog out, even if your dog is not involved, he could become when he sees what is going on.

When you are done at the park for whatever reason, leave in the same manner you came. Leash your dog, walk to the gate, enter, close one behind, ensuring no other dogs snuck in behind you, and open the second. Keep your dog on a short lead, do not hover outside the gate talking (if you need to talk with someone, move to the side), and head out.

Now we must discuss human behavior at dog parks. Along with making sure your dog is able to handle the stresses if a dog park, willing to accept the safety of your dog and others, you must follow up with good manners. First is personal behavior. As fast as scuffs between dogs can happen, so can altercations between humans. No matter how irritated you are, that other dog is someone's baby and the owner will protect a precious "pup". When you are dealing with owners, be calm and think about your words. For example, when trying to leave, you are being accosted by a goofy Lab whose owner is oblivious to what is going on. You are trying to get through the first gate and the Lab keeps forging in front of your dog. Instead of yelling would the owner of this dog get him, wording such as "I am afraid someone's dog is trying to follow me home," may be better received. Clean up after your dog and bring poop bags. Should your park provide communal water bowls, help keep them filled. If your dog digs a hole, fill it in. Do not treat the park as you would your yard, treat it as a place you are visiting and want to be able to visit again. Bad manners among dogs and humans could get the local residents calling for the park to be closed.

Finally, is the physical health of your dog. Make sure he is clear of parasites and up to date on all vaccines. Never assume the owner of the dog next to yours will have current anything. Never allow your dog's rabies vaccines to expire. Know your local laws as well. Some areas you have the month to get the vaccine updated while others is by the date of last vaccine (so if the vet gave the last vaccine on a June 15, on June 16 your dog may be considered unvaccinated). Keep an eye out for food or trash on the ground. Do not bring your dog if he has had vomiting or diarrhea within the past 24 (or better, 48) hours, if he is acting lethargic or just off. Dogs that are off their game will often be less tolerant of situations. If your dog is limping, keep him home. Again, that tolerance issue and you do not want the injury to worsen.

There are alternatives to dog parks. Many training facilities are offering supervised playgroups. These are monitored by trainers and volunteers who should have a decent understanding of dogs and be able to identify trouble before it starts. Since these are often pay-to-play sessions, they may not be as crowded. See if there is a "meet-up" group regionally (<http://www.meetup.com>). Get together with friends for play dates at different houses. If your dog happens not to be suited for any of these activities, then be his best friend, get active with long walks, activities such as Agility or Rally-O, and understand that not all dogs can play nice with others.

Suggested resources (please note these are just for informational purposes only and should not take the place of professional assistance):

[Fight! A Practical Guide To The Treatment Of Dog-Dog Aggression](#) by Jean Donaldson
[Mine! A Practical Guide to Resource Guarding](#) by Jean Donaldson
[On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals](#) by Turid Rugaas

There are new books on dog park safety, but since I have yet to read them, I will not recommend them as of now, <http://www.DogWise.com> carries them.