

Review: Dog Parks

Why I am not an advocate for dog parks!

AND HERE'S WHY:

I don't recommend dog parks. Not ever. 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. First, dog parks are rife with disease, especially giardia. Soft stool, diarrhea that comes and goes, horrible gas? Have your vet run a test for giardia. And then, of course, there's kennel cough, as well other fungi, viruses, fleas and worms. Second, 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 a 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 things 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 the stress you, as an owner, causes by 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. Lastly, 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.

One of my main reasons for not being a dog park advocate is what 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 impulse control, bite inhibition, and exchanging rewarding, affiliative, positive social interactions. 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 several years, until they are mature and have a solid foundation before I expose them to a possibly unsure environment. 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. Also keep in mind that fighting and bullying in dogs is a learned behavior just as much as anything else, and therefore once your dog does it a few times, it's now learned and bound to be repeated over and over again. And make no mistake--many dogs enjoy being a jerk! Your best bet is to not let it start in the first place, whether it's your dog being the bully or being the target. Of course I recommend dog-to-dog play! 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. Since dogs generally play in pairs, try for either just the two, 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.