

DOG PARKS

Dogs need exercise; lots of it. Responsible pet owners are always looking for good ways to wear their furry friends out, and toward the top of the list is the local dog park. I am often asked if I recommend dog parks as a good location for social interaction and exercise for dogs and I always say; it depends.

There are a variety of factors that can make dog parks either a great experience or a recipe for disaster. Let's look at a few of the factors that, as dog owners, you should consider.

- 1) Is your dog a good candidate for a dog park? Not all dogs are highly social. People assume that if their dog is just exposed to more and more dogs, he or she will start to enjoy the experience. There are differences among breeds and also among individuals with regards to their social distance, and how comfortable they may feel in a mix of unfamiliar dogs. A dog park is like a cocktail party. Some people are comfortable mixing with people they have never met, for others' this is a painful experience. Many dogs enjoy playing with their friends or other canine members of their family but can be reticent in communing with strange dogs. Dogs of this nature should not go to dog parks.
- 2) Are you using dog parks as the primary form of exercise? A dog should never enter a potentially charged area in an aroused or excited state. Many owners take their excited dogs straight from the car and turn them loose the second they get through the gate. Not only will your dog exude excitable energy but he or she will most likely not be tuned to your presence. Any experience you have with your pet should help to strengthen your bond. Before any dog is released off lead, he or she should be relaxed and listening to you. Rather than stand at the entrance way, walk the perimeter with your dog, interacting and praising when he comes to you voluntarily.
- 3) Does your dog have proper social manners? Dog parks are not places to teach a rude dog common social manners. Many dog parks have bullies who attempt to control the play, toys and even all the owners of other dogs. Although some well socialized and balanced dogs may put up with a bully, dogs with aggressive natures may not, and fights can occur. Timid dogs will find it especially difficult to function in the presence of a bully. To make matters worse, the owners of both the bully and the shy dog are often unaware of what is going on. Dogs who become highly aroused, display piloerection, growl or otherwise try to intimidate other dogs should not go to dog parks. Likewise, dogs who hide by their owners, snap or growl when an unfamiliar dog comes up for a polite greeting or who are clearly uncomfortable should not go to dog parks.

- 4) Are the people paying attention to what their dogs are doing? Ideally, each owner is focused on his or her dog's behavior and is ready to intercede. As new dogs enter the park, the balance of personalities can alter. Tuned in dog owners will know if their dog is becoming uncomfortable or stressed with a change in the situation and be ready to intervene. Owners should be actively engaged with their dog and most importantly, the dogs with their owners. Proactive responsible dog owners can make a dog park a success.

Dog Parks can be a lot of fun with the right mix of dogs and people, but they are not for everyone. As the owner, you must objectively assess your dog's personality to decide if the highly social and close communal environment is right for your dog. You must also be willing to intercede on your dogs' behalf and to remove him from a stressful situation.