

## Dog Park Considerations

Lots of owners don't have the luxury of a back yard where their dog can run loose and free. It's easy to see the appeal of a dog park for people in this situation. Dog parks also attract owners who want their dogs to socialize with other pooches. This can work for some dogs but not all. Sometimes the interactions in these settings are quite the opposite of being beneficial, instead instilling troublesome behaviours. Owners naturally want the best for their dogs, so we recommend thinking carefully about whether a dog park is right for yours. While it seems like a simple enough activity – opening a gate, letting your dog off leash, watching them run around with their kind – there's actually a lot to consider:



### Basic requirements

- It's important to have a dog that will recall to you in the dog park. If yours won't recall even in low-distraction scenarios, then they aren't ready for the dog park and need training. In this environment, you need to know your dog will choose to come to you when called.
- Be honest about your dog's temperament and behaviour and whether they're suited to the dynamics of a dog park. Dogs can be reserved in personality, and they can be selective about which canines they like to be with. It's a misconception that they'll all automatically enjoy milling around with a bunch of strange dogs. If your dog is timid of other canines, they are not a candidate for this type of engagement. Far better would be to find a friend with a calm, confident dog and go on walks together or have one-on-one play sessions. Maybe you've got a dog that's more like a bull in a china shop, ignoring or misreading signals from other dogs and persisting in impolite behaviours, provoking and escalating aggressive responses. This is definitely not a candidate for dog park harmony.
- How accurate is your ability to read canine body language? Frequently owners misconstrue what they're seeing in a dog park: for example, your dog is being chased relentlessly by another and you think, *Oh that's great, my dog is having fun!!* Are they? Maybe they're being hounded and are unable to escape. And they see you, the one they depend on, standing by and not helping. This can erode their confidence in you. Dog parks are often an arena in which bullying happens in the guise of play, and owners who are unaware of what's really taking place may find their formerly friendly and tolerant pooch gradually becoming defensive and fearful with other dogs.

### Do your research

Check out a variety of dog parks in your vicinity before using one:

- Is it securely fenced, with double-gated entrances to prevent a dog slipping out when another comes in?



- If it's not fenced, then it's likely not sanctioned by the municipality. Are you comfortable having your dog running off leash in an open space? Do you have a rock-solid recall?
- If you own a dog under 20 lbs, you might be wise to pick a dog park that has a small dog area (SDA), separating the little guys from encounters with larger dogs.
- How large is the dog park? Ideally, you want a sizeable play area with a smaller number of canine visitors. Dog-dog problems are quicker to arise in crowded, high-pressure situations.
- Survey the scene at the dog park: What's the energy level of the group, what type of interactions are taking place, how big are the dogs compared with yours (if there is no SDA)? Would you feel comfortable allowing your dog into the mix? Dog parks have their regulars but also attract new participants, which will alter the dynamics at every visit.
- Are there toys in use at the park? Balls, frisbees, squeaky toys and other valued items create competition between dogs and opportunities for resource guarding aggression. If your dog loves to fetch more than anything else, then pick a large enough park where you can toss their toy well away from the dogs that are mingling.

### How to have a safe and enjoyable visit

If you've settled on a dog park that seems suitable, practise safe management to ensure you and your dog have an enjoyable time:

- If possible, visit during off-peak hours when there are fewer dogs.
- Try to direct your dog to appropriate play partners with similar energy levels and play styles. Even if the dogs are well matched, you still need to:
- Pay attention -- *all* the time. It may seem like dog parks are places where people can relax, chat, and watch their phones while their dogs exercise themselves. In fact, you should be supervising and carefully observing all interactions.
- Call your dog repeatedly to you throughout your dog park session, then reward the behaviour by letting them go back to join the others. This reinforces the dog's recall but also helps keep canine interactions brief and friendly. When it's time to go, retrieve the dog rather than create a negative association with a recall to leave the park.
- Know when to intervene: rough housing is part of dog play, but dogs that are humping others, pinning others, assuming bullying postures such as placing their muzzle across another dog's shoulders, are not playing. If your dog is the offender, immediately end the interaction and lead them away. If it's another dog, request the same response from their owner. If that person won't oblige, or allows the behaviour again, then leave. There's no point in mingling with humans and dogs that are not cooperative and polite.



- Keep visits short: the object is not to be at the dog park so long that your dog is about to drop. Over-tired dogs engaging with other dogs can over-arouse and cause trouble.
- Limit your number of visits to once or twice a week. It's great for your dog to have happy, healthy encounters at the dog park. However, you want to balance that enrichment with other types, such as one-on-one walks, hikes, and play sessions with you that strengthen your relationship. Ultimately, you want the bond between you and your dog to be stronger than the one between them and the dog park.

