

The Dog Park Is Bad, Actually

Dog parks may seem like great additions to the community, but they're rife with problems — for you, and for your dog. Here's what to know before you go.

By **Sassafras Lowrey**

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Every morning, rain, shine or snow, people stand around making conversation with strangers as their dogs chase, run and mingle. Ranging from elaborate fenced playgrounds and rolling fields to small inner-city runs, dog parks are among the fastest growing park amenities nationwide. The Trust for Public Land found that there has been a 40 percent increase in the development of dog parks since 2009.

The first dog park in the United States was the Ohlone Dog Park, which was founded by Martha Scott Benedict and Doris Richards in 1979 in Berkeley, Calif. Since then, dog parks have become standard amenities in developing city and suburban neighborhoods across the country, but are they actually good for dogs? Surprisingly, canine behavior experts aren't so sure.

According to a 2018 survey conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association (N.R.P.A.), 91 percent of Americans believe dog parks provide benefits to their communities. This was especially true among millennials and Gen Xers, who overwhelmingly recognized dog parks as beneficial amenities. The study found that the top two reasons responders cited for supporting dog parks were that 60 percent thought that they gave dogs a safe space to exercise and roam freely, and 48 percent felt that dog parks were important because they allowed dogs to socialize.

Especially for urban dogs that don't have backyards to exercise in, dog parks can sound like a great idea. There is nothing natural, however, about dogs that aren't familiar with one another to be put in large groups and expected to play together. Many of us just accept the assumption that dog parks are good places to socialize a dog, but that may not be the case.

The socialization myth

Nick Hof, a certified professional dog trainer and chair of The Association of Professional Dog Trainers, explained that in terms of canine behavior, the term "socialization" isn't just dogs interacting or "socializing" with other dogs, but rather, "the process of exposing young puppies under 20 weeks to new experiences."

"This helps them have more confidence and adapt to new situations," Mr. Hof said.

Though socialization is critical for the healthy development of puppies, the dog park is not where you want to bring your puppy to learn about appropriate interactions with other dogs, Mr. Hof added.

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"Dog parks are not a safe place to socialize a puppy under 6-12 months old," he continued. "During our puppy's early months, they are more sensitive to experiences, so a rambunctious greeter at the park may be enough to cause our puppy to be uncertain of all dogs," Mr. Hof explained.

The goal for socializing young puppies is to ensure they have only positive interactions, and to avoid any overwhelming or frightening interactions. Instead of taking puppies to a dog park for socialization, Mr. Hof encourages owners to attend puppy classes with their dog to meet age-appropriate playmates.

Socialization with older dogs is a bit more challenging, because in a behavioral sense, older dogs have already had all of their formative socialization experiences. Dog guardians generally mean well when they bring a shy dog to the dog park with the intention of giving that dog positive interactions with other dogs. Unfortunately, this can backfire; a dog who is nervous or uncomfortable is more likely to be easily overwhelmed in a park setting, which can lead to dog fights or a long-term fear of encountering other dogs. A park setting also allows dogs to pick up bad habits from one another, and is definitely not a place you want to bring a dog who is under-socialized.

Playground bullies

Although dogs are social animals and regularly engage in various forms of play, the artificial setup of a dog park can be challenging. Many people bring their dogs to the park to burn off excess energy, but these dogs often display over-aroused and rude behavior that can trigger issues between dogs. Dr. Heather B. Loenser, senior veterinary officer of the American Animal Hospital Association cautioned that "unfortunately, just because an owner thinks their dog plays well with others, doesn't mean they always do."

Having your dog in a dog park requires trusting that everyone in the park is monitoring their dog, and is a good judge about whether their dog should be in the park in the first place. That's a lot of trust to put in a stranger.

Unlike doggy day cares or play groups, most dog parks are public spaces that are not screened or supervised by canine professionals.

This can be an issue with fights between dogs that can lead to dogs learning inappropriate behaviors from other dogs. “Bad experiences can also ripple outward and cause our dogs to have issues or concerns outside of the dog park as well,” Mr. Hof said, adding that dogs at dog parks might pick up bad habits such as being pushy when greeting or engaging in play with other dogs. On other hand, dogs that are overwhelmed by the boisterousness of others may become withdrawn, skittish and nervous when meeting other dogs in and out of the dog park.

Injuries

One of the biggest dangers of dog parks is that they often don’t have separate play enclosures for large and small dogs, or when they do, owners can choose to disregard those spaces. Even without meaning to, a large dog can easily cause serious injury or even kill a smaller dog.

From minor scuffles to serious incidents, injuries are common at dog parks. Bite wounds are common, even from rough play. Even if the wound seems small, “seek veterinary care immediately,” Dr. Loenser advised.

Bites that occur in fights or during play often involve tearing under the skin, which can be complicated to heal, and may carry a greater risk of infection. Muscle strains and sprains from lunging and rough play are also common. “Anytime dogs quickly pivot on their back legs, they are also at risk for tearing the ligaments, specifically the cranial cruciate ligament in their knees,” Dr. Loenser said. These types of knee-and-ligament injuries often require expensive surgery and extensive healing and rehabilitation.

Diseases

Even clean and well maintained dog parks can pose health risks, in particular the spread of easily communicable diseases. One challenge of dog parks being unregulated public spaces is that while most post signs saying dogs should be vaccinated, no proof of vaccinations is actually required.

The American Animal Hospital Association advises owners who bring their pets to the park to have them vaccinated with the Bordetella vaccine, which prevents “kennel cough,” as well as distemper. You’ll also want to have your dog vaccinated against leptospirosis, as communal water bowls, puddles and other water features in dog parks can carry leptospira bacteria. All dogs should be vaccinated against rabies, and dogs that visit dog parks should be on flea and tick prevention as well as year-round heartworm prevention. Dogs that visit dog parks should also be vaccinated against canine influenza (dog flu) that can be transmitted through the air.

Dr. Loenser cautioned that although “currently, the influenza vaccines available cover for the strains that are most commonly seen, if new strains are introduced or mutate, these vaccines might not provide cross-protection.” If that were to occur, dogs that visited dog parks and had contact with a large number of dogs that might or might not be fully vaccinated would be at risk of getting sick.

Body language

Most dog owners aren’t skilled at reading their dog’s body language beyond a wagging tail, so warning signs that your dog is uncomfortable, unhappy or angry are often ignored. This leads to minor and major dog fights. Understanding canine body language is key to supporting your dog’s comfort and safety, and assessing if a playgroup at the dog park is going to be a good match.

“The dog park is not a place for you to let your dog run unsupervised while you socialize with other people,” Mr. Hof said. “Keep an eye on your dog and make sure that they are both being good and having a good time.” This means watching the actions and behaviors of your dog and the other dogs in the park. If things are getting too intense, that’s a good time to leave.

But what exactly should you be watching for? Dr. Loenser says that subtle signs of fear or aggression include “lip licking, yawning or panting when not hot.” Other signs of discomfort or a brewing issue include stiff bodies and erect tails. Keeping an eye out for these signs can give you the edge to intervene on your dog’s behalf before an interaction with another dog escalates.

Even dogs that appear to be playing well together may be at risk. “Healthy play between dogs should include small breaks or pauses,” Mr. Hof said. “If you are uncertain about if all dogs are happy, I recommend stopping the dog who may be too over-the-top and seeing what the other dog does. If the other dog tries to re-engage, it’s a good indicator that everything was okay. If the other dog runs off though, a break was a good idea.”

Any kind of behavior that involve one dog pinning another dog is also one to avoid. Barking, growling and other vocalization occasionally during play is normal, but frenzied barking is generally too much.

Dog park alternatives

On a good day, if the dog park you visit is large enough, it may physically tire out your dog. But the visit won’t actually provide your dog with the kind of enriching mental and emotional stimulation that dogs need. Dog parks, unfortunately, are often more about humans than they are about dogs.

As much as humans enjoy the chance to socialize with other like-minded animal lovers while our dogs play, it’s far safer and more fun for your dog to skip the dog park and spend that time engaging intentionally with you and their surroundings by going on walks, taking a training or general obedience class or even trying a new sport together. Ultimately you’re the only one who can determine if the risks outweigh the benefits

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of dog parks, but there is no shame in not surrendering your dog to what has become the quintessential urban dog experience: running with dozens of strangers in a small, smelly pen as people stand by, looking at their phones or gossiping. Make the time you have with your dog meaningful and enriching; after all, your dog wants to spend time with you, too.

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