



## Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

### Dog Parks – the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

In many areas of our country, dog parks are seen as necessary, as a way to exercise pets and to socialize them to other dogs. While it is true that dogs need regular exercise, dog parks may not be the best choice for many owners.

If all the dogs playing are compatible with one another, there are no problems. And, most of the time, there are none. But the potential is always there, and the responsible dog owner knows this and is prepared.

Many people actually use dog parks to socialize with friends and acquaintances. This is a great idea, except that when one is chatting with a friend, it's hard to watch one's dog, and they do require watching. It only takes a moment for something to happen. Dog parks can also be great places for dogs to learn bad things! Here are some examples.

- Dogs learn that they don't have to obey their owners, and that their owners can't make them. When the owner calls, the dog doesn't respond. When the owner chases, the dog runs away. In just minutes, he's learned he is smarter, faster and more agile than his owners.
- Dogs learn to bully other dogs. Let's face it; dogs have different play styles. Some are very physical, and love to body slam each other. Some like to chase, or to be chased. And some are quite cautious and sensitive. If a dog learns that cautious, shy dogs are fun to bully, then he's learned something we would rather he hadn't... and the shy, cautious dog has learned that he is not safe in a dog park, and his owner can't help him if another dog chases him.
- Some dogs learn that they have to protect themselves, and they use aggression to do so. These dogs – usually the shy, cautious ones – might find a bench to hide under. From there, they'll growl and snap. Once a dog has used this method to drive away other, scary dogs, she'll do it again and again.
- Dogs learn that they have a right to meet and greet all other dogs. While this may not seem to be a problem, it breeds something called "leash aggression," which is really a canine tantrum. These dogs pull madly on their leashes to get to other dogs, the owners pull back angrily, the dogs pull harder and often bark, and oncoming dogs see their posture and believe they are aggressive, as do their owners.
- Many dogs develop possession or guarding problems in parks. They'll guard their own balls or toys – or they'll find those of another dog, and guard them!
- And some dogs can't seem to calm down once they've become excited. They're the ones that will get into two or three scuffles in a row – not because they're aggressive, but because they have too much energy, and no place to put it.

Owners contribute to dog park problems as well. Often, they don't recognize problem behavior – or they chastise a dog for behaving improperly when he really didn't. Or, more often, they just tell the owner of a frightened dog that the dogs will "work it out." They may, but it might not be the way you wanted them to. If a dog is traumatized at a young age in a dog park, he may develop lasting behavioral issues – which we really don't want.

Bully dogs are often the ones that learn the worst behaviors the fastest. It's for this reason that I recommend that they play only with good buddies, and not with strangers, and that their owners develop games that the two of them – human and canine – can play together. After all, we chose our dog to be OUR companion, not the companion of other dogs!

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