

# Dog Park Mania... Ask a Trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDDBC, CPDT, KPA CTP

Dear Trainer,

I like to take my 3-year-old Australian Shepherd to the dog park a couple of times a week for exercise and to socialize her with other dogs and she seems to enjoy her time there most of the time. However, there are some days that she will not interact with some of the dogs and actually will snarl and snap at them when they approach. It seems to be toward dogs that are rowdy and bouncy. She snaps the most at some of the terriers and the big strong dogs such as labs and pit bulls.

I'm not sure what to do about this. The last time she snarled at a lab that was jumping on her the owner got really angry at me and said my dog is aggressive, but my dog has never gotten into a fight, she is just grumpy with certain dogs. I would appreciate your suggestions and ideas on what I should do about my dog's conduct when she does that to other dogs.

Signed,

*Parked in Neutral*

Dear Neutral,

This is a great subject and one that comes up a lot with my clients. Because there are a lot of factors with this subject, I will break this into two parts: Pros and Cons this week and then How to Have a Successful Dog Park Experience next week.

Trish King, CPDT, CDDBC is the director of the Marin County Humane Society's behavior department and she once wrote a piece for the Chronicle of the Dog, (Nov/Dec 2004, Vol. XI No 6) about dog parks that I thought was an insightful look at them. In this piece she said, "A dog park is like a cocktail party, where you don't know anyone and everyone is drunk. You could have fun, but it could be a disaster."

That's about as true as it gets! There are so many aspects when it comes to dog parks that even the best experts in dog behavior have trouble keeping up with all the different postures, expressions, and signals that the dogs are using to express their feelings at any given moment, so it's no wonder the average pet parent has trouble deciding what is going on.

## **Pros of dog parks**

Dog parks provide exercise and a social outlet for both dogs and humans and these seem to be the main reasons that people take their dogs to them. They are a great place to meet with other dog lovers and many people tell me they go at the same time each week to meet with their friends and their dogs. These seem to be some of the best interactions for the dogs, as they know each other better and there is not the "new dog in town" factor that can lead to more scuffles and over-aroused states.

## **Cons of dog parks**

Unfortunately, the cons outweigh the pros with many of the negative results ending in behavior problems and sometimes injury.

The very configuration of the park can be a problem as some layouts are just not conducive to nice play. The bigger the space the better--Places like Fiesta Island are always recommended over small, crowded dog parks where the options for dogs to move away from other dogs is limited.

Many dogs learn how, or play roughly and that is not always appreciated by other dogs that are more settled, may have some joint issues or are not as social. Body slamming play styles are often met with growls or snaps and sometimes fights when the "victim" doesn't enjoy that type of play. This is most likely the case with your dog.

Rude behavior is another problem. A fellow trainer reported that someone's boxer, who was rudely mounting other dogs, eventually came over to her and urinated on her leg and the owner simply commented, "Well, you are in a dog park." There is no excuse for rude behavior in either situation, dog park or no, but many people feel their dogs can do what they want since it's "their time."

Dogs also learn that their humans are not reliable in protecting them, or that they will "bail them out" when things get too out of hand. This teaches dogs that they can go way over the top with their behaviors and someone will come to their rescue (these dogs often turn into bullies) or that they should be much more defensive as their humans are not going to step in when they need help. All of this can teach dogs to be more disobedient, and aggressive when visiting with other dogs.

A training client of mine reported that her dog was attacked and then needed medical care after a recent dog park visit. This was a case of resource guarding of a ball. My client's dog was playing ball with her owner when the other dog tried to grab the ball away. My client's dog tried to defend her ball but didn't fair well during the altercation and needed stitches in her ear. Guarding toys, space and humans can be a problem in dog park situations.

Everyone is an expert at dog parks. When I go with my clients to dog parks I get to overhear many people claiming to be dog behavior experts, such as the case with the woman that said your dog was aggressive. If your dog was actually aggressive, there would have been a fight, not display behaviors your dog used. It sounds like your dog simply told the other dog to "back off," and that is an acceptable communication between dogs.

Trish King, as mentioned before, collected data from her clients and found that in every case of aggression that she counseled more dogs than not used dog parks.

So, there it is in a nutshell. Dog parks can be useful and fun for some dogs, but not all and it's a "user beware" situation as your dog may come away with trauma or behavior issues that will require professional help along the way.

Look for Part II of Dog Parks next week where I'll cover how to have a successful dog park experience.

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