

Dangers of Off-Leash Dog Parks

by Living Safe Australia
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This article is an important one for any dog owner to read. If you care about your dog's safety you really need to understand the risks and the dangers of off-leash dog parks.

As an animal activist and a registered dog minder, I know a fair bit about dog behaviour and my stance on off-leash, dog parks is simply, don't take the risk, your dog's life is way too precious!

I have spoken with many vets, dog behaviorists and trainers, as well as researching into the number of dog fatalities and serious injuries caused due to dog park aggression. The facts are this, while there are no recorded statistic to show numbers, the amount of dogs getting killed and seriously hurt each year due to off-leash dog park aggression is huge.

Read this interview on the ABC News with respected dog behaviourist and trainer Vicki Austin.

Arguments Pro Off Leash Dog Parks

Let's look at the standard arguments I get from dog owners as to why they feel their beloved pooch needs to go to an off-leash dog park;

- My dog needs the socializing
- My dog doesn't like to walk on a lead
- My dog loves it

While I agree with the above points, here are the facts;

Yes your dog does need socializing with other canines, however it must be in a controlled, supervised environment and only if your dog is a well-adjusted, calm and relaxed dog. If your dog has any of the following issues; anxiety, nervousness, hyper-activeness, fearfulness, or is overtly dominant, then before socializing with other canines, your dog needs the help of a registered dog behaviourist.

A dog that doesn't like walking on a lead, is a dog that hasn't been trained to walk properly on a lead and enjoy it. Again this is when a dog trainer needs to come into the picture. The same goes for a dog that pulls on the lead, even while enjoying his walk.

Of course dogs love the freedom to be able to run around in a pack of other dogs, but a well-functioning dog pack is one that works well together and where the hierarchy has been worked out and each dog knows its place. Throwing a bunch of dogs who don't properly know each other into an enclosed area to form a pack, is just plain dangerous.

Arguments Against Off-Leash Dog Parks

- No dog owner can possibly preempt what other dogs are going to be at an off-leash dog park at any given visit.
- No dog owner can know with 100% certainty that their dog is going to get along with every dog it meets. Just like people, dogs are not going to like every other dog they meet.
- Some dogs immediately start rough playing, and according to dog behaviourist Vicki Austin, this is known as “dog social incompetence”. No dog should ever rush up to another dog they don’t know and start rough play. Although not aggressive themselves, this rough play can trigger an aggressive response in a dog that is not used to it, or a dog that doesn’t want to be approached this way.
- Remember no matter how small, cute and fluffy a dog may be, it is a dog **with dog instincts, not human ones**, and despite the adorableness factor, it still may not have good dog social etiquette. Small snappy dogs can often cause huge brawls in dog parks, but due to their minute stature, they end up looking like the victims, with the poor innocent bigger dogs getting the blame.
- At a busy off leash dog park, the excitement level of all the dogs is extremely high and excitement can quickly escalate to aggression if a dog steps out of line.
- At a busy off leash dog park, dog owners are often too busy chatting and socializing with each other to watch closely the interaction between their dog and all the other dogs.
- If another dog attacks your dog at an off-leash dog park, there is no lead on either dog that you can quickly grab to separate them. Instead if you try to get in-between two fighting dogs, you also risk getting seriously mauled.
- Any dog is capable of biting, even the most placid dog. I have heard of dogs who have never ever bitten suddenly turning and biting. There are many reasons this could happen. They could be feeling sore or unwell, they may see a new dog who isn’t acting appropriately according to dog protocol, as a serious threat. They may be timid and frightened, or some dogs as they get older, just don’t have the patience anymore when a young excitable dog starts to annoy them and initiate play.
- Some dogs have never had proper training and socializing with other dogs, in a controlled environment with a qualified dog trainer, and so simply don’t act appropriately. Often these dogs haven’t learnt when to back off when another dog is given them warning signs. If a dog does not accurately know how to read the body language of another dog, who is clearly giving off signs of leave me alone, then the young dog will get bitten if it keeps annoying the other dog. Biting is a dogs natural defense mechanisms.
- Mixing large dogs with small and fragile dogs at off-leash dog parks is an accident waiting to happen. Even playing together without super close supervision and the ability to reel in your dog can lead to serious and even fatal accidents. I really like this article on the issue of big and little dogs at off -leash dog parks by Riley’s Place . Big dogs of course can live happily with small dogs, if they have a responsible owner and correct training, but in an off-leash dog park you have know control of the size or nature of the other dogs.

How To Socialize Your Dog Safely with other Dogs

So my advice is this;

Skip the off-leash dog parks altogether.

To socialize your dog with other dogs, (only if your dog already has good doggy manners around other dogs) incorporate the following ideas into your dog's lifestyle;

- Play-dates with other dogs that you know are also well trained and relaxed around other dogs. This is initially best done by first taking both dogs for a calm 30 minute walk together before introducing them into each other's home territory.
- Regularly go walking together with another doggy friend.
- If you are worried your dog is lonely, then the best solution is to adopt another dog as a friend. It needs to have the right energy level and temperament to suit your dog. Always take a dog on trial basis before adopting, to ensure your dog and the new dog accept each other.
- If your dog is on its own a lot, dog sitting is an awesome solution. Dropping your dog off at a registered dog minder, or at a friend's house that has a dog that it gets along with really well, while you're at work can be a great idea.

Remember you are your dog's best friend, so please make sure to walk your dog every day and to play and interact with him to keep him from getting bored and feeling lonely.