

The Case Against Dog Parks

Dogs are a social species. They prosper when their environment is structured and supervised and routines maintained. They get along with other dogs quite well when owners indicate the parameters within which they must behave.

Dogs have been taught to work with man to help the disabled, rescue the lost, maintain law, herd farm animals, and entertain. Countless others calmly walk alongside an owner on leash on sidewalks of busy cities or towns or while hiking with him in the wild, and often off leash under control when running or retrieving, or swimming while with their people.

They play and interact with owners, then fulfilled, happily curl up to nap at their owner's side till called upon to work and interact once more. When given human direction both intact and sterile working and pet canines behave admirably in close quarters with others of their own species.

What happens when unsupervised dogs run on their own? Because of that very inherent social nature there may be unintended consequences.

Owners have been told the oft repeated fiction that dogs, especially those who are the only pets in the household, must be exposed to and allowed to play with other canines to be happy. So they bring the dogs to designated outdoor areas called "dog parks" and set them loose to follow their own devices.

It is that very freedom that places on the pets a responsibility they usually are not able to handle. Why do we humans make the assumption that every dog must immediately like one another?

Let us look through a pet dog's eyes.

Dogs enter a fenced or roped off designated area with owners, leashes are removed and the dog is encouraged to leave his owners to "play." His people then stand around or sit on benches placed around the perimeter of the "play area," as the newly abandoned canines are left to wander alone to meet strangers in this new environment. Without direction or consent they must suddenly form a congenial pack.

Owners see a play area, but dogs that are an olfactory species also scent the messages of what has taken place the day or week before. The pet may go from tree to tree learning what signals prior visitors have left. With as little as one drop of his urine he leaves a message of his own.

The next time this pet is brought to the park he is likely to be abandoned by his owner once more to face yet a different group of canine strangers, new smells covering the old. Nevertheless he's expected to quickly acclimate. In this situation aggressive dogs may overwhelm submissive dogs, and after a while an uncertain pack order of a sort may form for the day.

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Proud owners, enthralled with the idea of entering a "play group" often read dog's body language wrong only to exacerbate this somewhat already uncertain situation.

They may misread the signal of an upright tail quivering at the tip as happiness. "Look at the way Fido's tail is wagging," they exclaim, misunderstanding the dog's message of fright, fight or flight. If they see

a dog whose head is held low, lips opened in a grin with teeth visible, they mistake the submissive behavior for aggressiveness. Small dogs are encouraged to accost larger dogs for fun as the owner states that his dog just wants to be friendly. We humans are lucky larger dogs often are very tolerant of this type of incitement.

Non interference of "play" can instead lead to untoward incidents. Are dog parks staffed by paid workers knowledgeable of dog behavior so these untoward instances are avoided? Usually not.

For countless generations dogs and owners have worked, played and trained alongside one another, each secure in the partnership of the other. Dogs left in doggie day care centers are supervised by staff, and are usually kept sequestered in safe surroundings with a specific, small, congenial group of canines that have gotten to know one another over a period of time.

But the dog that is left to his own devices in constantly changing new settings without direction is often uncertain and as a result can become aggressive or fearful. The partnership of owner/dog has been violated, the structured, safe environment has disappeared, and at just the moment the dog needs his owner's input the most, the owner has withdrawn that very direction, support, and safety. While trying to enrich the life of his pet, the owner has performed an act that actually violates the human/canine bond of trust.

Do I like dog parks? No.

They are all too often just one more instance of uninformed owners misunderstanding the needs of their pets, and accidents waiting to happen. ■ *Barbara Axel*

Barbara Axel, breeder/trainer/exhibitor, Board Member of North Carolina Responsible Animal Owners Alliance (NCRAOA), has organized and participated in programs promoting responsible pet ownership since the late '60's.