

Dog-Dog Socialization: Beyond the Dog Park

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I don't ever take my dogs to the dog park. The idea of the dog park is a great one: a safe place where dogs can play together and run free. However, in reality, I find that dog parks cause more issues than they solve, so I turn instead to other options for my own dogs



There are several major problems with dog parks. The largest issue I personally have with public dog parks is the **lack of oversight** available for who attends them. I do not know the physical or behavioral health status of any of the dogs who attend, and the risk of exposing my dog to a sick or aggressive dog is much higher than with any other means of socialization.

Unvaccinated dogs or those who are carrying parasites or viruses (such as kennel cough) are all possibilities. Since my dogs are healthy and are provided with appropriate immunizations and parasite control, this alone wouldn't be a deal-breaker. However, behaviorally unhealthy dogs are a much bigger risk.

The largest problem with dog parks is that owners are often oblivious to or unconcerned about the behavior of their dogs. Many owners spend time at the dog park chatting with each other or on their phones, not even watching their dog. Dog parks are not appropriate places to bring dogs for remedial socialization, yet many people attempt to do just that. Many well-meaning people also bring their new or unsocialized dogs to the dog park with no idea of the dog's comfort level around other dogs, a doggy version of "trial by fire." Working as a dog behavior consultant, I receive calls and emails on a regular basis from people whose dog has either injured or been injured by another dog at the dog park. These calls range from a dog who has developed fear issues after being playfully jumped by a much larger dog at the dog park to a dog who literally ripped the ear off another dog when the two got into a scuffle over a ball.

There's a saying among trainers: "if you go to the dog park long enough, something bad will happen." While there are certainly lots of friendly, well-socialized, and healthy dogs who attend the dog park, it's impossible to totally protect your dog from bad experiences in such an uncontrolled environment. This may not be a big deal for well-socialized, balanced, stable dogs, who will just shake off the bad experience and continue on. Young (under two years old), fearful, or easily upset dogs may not be so blasé about the experience, however. One traumatic experience can set a dog up for a lifetime of fear or reactivity, something we trainers see all too heartbreakingly often.

As if this weren't enough, **I also avoid the dog park because of what my dog is likely to learn there.** The average dog park attendee is an adolescent, setting the stage for a canine version of *The Lord of the Flies* since there are few adults around to keep order. Rude, pushy, and over-aroused behavior is often the norm. Practicing such behaviors teaches the dog that this is how he should interact with others of his species, and now we have a canine Tarzan or bully in the making.

Recall issues (where the dog refuses to come when called, or worse yet, plays "keep away" from his owner) are common at dog parks, and are a common reason why owners call me for training help. Dogs quickly learn that coming to their owners ends the fun, and start to avoid being caught. One client recently called me after she had to spend nearly *four hours* trying to catch her dog! She was finally able to snare the wayward pooch after her dog darted into the smaller fenced-in entrance area to greet a new dog.

So, how do I socialize my dogs? There are many great ways for your dog to enjoy the company of his own kind that are much safer and more enjoyable for all involved.

My dogs enjoy regular **playdates** with doggy friends. Playdates are based on my dogs' age and play preferences, with my older dogs enjoying side-by-side walks (both on and off-leash) with their buddies and the new puppy enjoying regular off-leash chase and wrestling games with her friends. Ask around to find play partners for your dog:

friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors are all great networks to tap. If one of you has a fenced-in yard, meet there for some off-leash play. Fenced-in tennis courts, baseball fields, and other such areas are also often available at local parks. One creative client of mine rented a neighbor's fenced-in yard when she couldn't find any other alternatives! A well-run **doggy daycare** can also provide your dog with regular access to other playmates, and you can feel comfortable knowing that the other dogs who attend daycare are also vaccinated and friendly.

Finally, my dogs receive regular socialization through **training classes and dog sports**. While the dogs may not directly interact with one another in these venues, they are still a vital piece of the socialization puzzle. **Learning to focus on you and remain calm in the presence of other dogs is an important life skill.** Human children are given time to play with one another and run around during recess, but also learn to sit still and focus in the classroom at school. Similarly, I don't want my dog getting overly excited every time she sees another dog because she thinks she's going to get to play. A dog who squeals and bucks at the end of the leash every time he sees another dog is not a well-socialized dog no matter how friendly he is, because he's never learned how to control himself around his own species. Imagine if a human teenager or adult acted like that! Social behavior also includes the ability to just hang out calmly with members of one's own species.

Some dog parks are better than others, and I may be more likely to attend a dog park with lots of space and trails than our local parks where dogs and people congregate around picnic tables. However, I honestly believe that there are better alternatives to the dog park. **Providing socialization opportunities for my dogs is important, but that includes the responsibility to make sure that those opportunities are always safe and positive.**