



## Dangers at Dog Parks

Even with the best socialization, dogs don't always interact appropriately in large 'packs' of unfamiliar dogs. Dogs thrive with stable relationships based on predictability and established social roles. Dogs weren't meant to play with unfamiliar dogs in large groups such as dog parks.

It is amazing how many dogs have been injured at a dog park and people think that is just a risk you assume. Unlike child playgrounds where the most common injuries result from accidents, at dog parks, the most common injuries result from fights or violence. Most owners assume that dogs will be dogs and you should just let the dogs work things out. Owners that intervene on behalf of their dog are shamed and told that their dog will never learn if they baby him.

### **COMMON BEHAVIORS SEEN AT DOG PARKS**

The most common behaviors seen at dogs parks are bullying, mobbing, hunting, group chasing, and targeting. These are dangerous, instinctive, pack behaviors that are not to be confused with play. These behaviors don't happen because there are just bad dogs at dog parks. They happen because bad things happen when dogs are left to their own natural pack behavior and humans do nothing to intervene. Dogs are simply left to practice being the animals they actually are.

### **BULLYING**

Bullying is the most common group-facilitated behavior seen at a dog park. Bullying is best described as pushy, relentless, over-powering, out of control behavior, with no regard for the other dog. It is not play; it is a form of aggression. It should not be allowed to happen. It is often exacerbated by the environment, circumstances, and adrenaline or arousal. It is traumatizing to the victim and causes defensiveness and reactivity. Bully dogs may not be bullies at home but are empowered by the other dogs at a dog park. Statistically, young dogs that are allowed to bully, mature into dogs with aggression and impulse control disorders.

### **PLAY**

So what is play? The dictionary defines it as an activity for enjoyment or recreation. But that would not be an acceptable definition for dog play because one would agree that it is not acceptable for a dog to have fun at the expense of another as in the case of a bully. Mark Twain defines it best: Play is anything a body is not obliged to do. So with that definition, we cannot allow our dogs to bully other dogs in the name of play.

### **MOBBING**

Mobbing is a frenzied grouping in response to vulnerability. It is a part of an instinctual predatory sequence in which the links are: eye, stalk, chase, grab, bite, kill. But just because we see a part of the chain does not mean that we can conclude that mobbing is predatory. It is instinctual but it is only a portion of the predatory chain. So how does mobbing play out at a dog park?

1. It happens in a group of dogs in which humans aren't intervening.
2. The group of dogs is generally not socially stable or even familiar with each other.
3. If one dog shows vulnerability, weakness, gets hurt, cries, squeals, or doesn't disengage then the fight is on.
4. Other dogs pile on.

What looks like predation and is actually a part of that chain is consistent with an adaptive response in a hunting pack. Canids (i.e., wolves, foxes, dogs), as a social species, do not hunt alone. They hunt as a group. One leads the group and the others hang back. One runs after the prey and takes the prey down and the others mob and pile on. So why isn't this predation at the dog park? Our dogs aren't intending to hunt, bite, kill, and eat their prey. But the sequence gets awfully close to the predatory sequence and there is absolutely no reason for our dogs to be practicing this behavior!

Let's clarify what is appropriate and what is inappropriate with chasing.

#### Appropriate chase:

- One on one only.
- The one being chased has his tail held high or level with his back but it is definitely not tucked.
- The one chasing has his ears back.
- When the dogs meet up there is no physical contact.
- There are often reversals in roles unless the dogs are familiar and have chosen and are comfortable with their specific roles.

#### Inappropriate chase:

- More than one dog chasing.
- The one being chased has his tail tucked and is often unwilling to turn his back to the dog that is chasing.
- The dogs that are chasing have their ears forward and have their tails up.
- There is usually physical contact when the dogs meet up in the form of pummels, rolls, mounts, mouth grabs, etc.
- The ones chasing are rarely chased. They target a particular dog or dogs to chase.

Even when appropriate chase is taking place, instinct takes over and a whole group is joining in making the one who is being chased anxious and defensive.

This can quickly become a mobbing episode. Calling the targeted victim to a human quickly diffuses the opportunistic mob.

### **PREDATORY DRIFT**

Play often follows several sequences of predatory behavior. You have the chasing, the stalking and the biting. Most dogs will engage in many ritualistic behaviors to tell the other dog they are only playing under the form of play bows and inhibited bites. However, at certain times, that predatory instinct prevails and once it starts it must end, at times with dire consequences. This is called predatory drift.

This phenomenon may take place when larger dogs play with smaller dogs. The dogs seem to play very well, when out of the blue, the larger dog suddenly goes in for the kill. There are several reports of these happenings and sadly, the smaller dogs often don't survive the bite and accompanying head shakes once grabbed by the neck. This is why many dog parks are separating large and small dog areas. Unfortunately, many are still only separating based on active and passive dogs instead of size!

### **MOUTH WRESTLING**

Dogs like to wrestle as well and since they don't have opposable thumbs, the only way they have to grasp is with their mouths. In a home environment, housemates may enjoy mutual wrestling. But even in a home environment, care should be taken to ensure that mouth wrestling is appropriate in order to keep relationships from becoming too rough and competitive. In a dog park environment this is especially important since mouth wrestling is often played with unfamiliar dogs. This can lead to inappropriate, competitive, controlling 'play' which can attract bullies, cause targeting, mobbing, etc.

#### Appropriate mouth wrestling:

- There are a lot of breaks in the play.
- There is a lot of shared air space or space between the dogs.
- The dogs do not displace or drag body parts with their mouth.
- There are often reversals in roles unless the dogs are familiar and have chosen and are comfortable with their specific roles.

#### Inappropriate mouth wrestling:

- There are few to no breaks in the play.
- There is virtually no space between the dogs.
- The dogs displace or drag body parts with their mouth. They may shake their head once they bite down with no injury to the other dog.
- There are no reversals in roles; the dogs play to obtain control.

Even when there is appropriate play taking place at the dog park, it is all too common for other dogs to see appropriate wrestling as a vulnerability and animal instinct takes over and play quickly becomes inappropriate.

## CONCLUSION

There are many fights and "arguments" at dog parks. Thankfully, most dogs sustain only minor injuries. The worst damage is the behavioral or psychological damage that is done to dogs when owners are completely unaware. These dangers and inappropriate or red flag behaviors are going on while the owners fail to pay attention or intervene at appropriate times. Dog parks aren't bad in and of themselves. If they operated like a well-run day care with attentive, educated owners, things could be different. Do we want dogs to practice and fine tune their hunting and predatory skills? Or do we want them to be responsive to our direction and guidance to minimize the instincts lurking inside?

So what can you do if you want to take your dog to the dog park?

- The dog park should be an interactive experience between you and your dog. Walk around and reward your dog with touch and praise every time he looks at you, returns to you on his own, or comes when you call.
- Your dog needs to know that you have his back and he can rely on you when there is any conflict.
- Before you enter the dog park, watch from the outside for several minutes to get a feel for the dynamics of the group of dogs inside. If you see a lot of inappropriate chase and bullying, don't go in.
- Follow your dog wherever he goes to stay a part of his experience.
- If your dog is being chased for any reason (even if he is having fun – it will quickly get out of control), call him to you while squatting down to make yourself more inviting. If he is being chased with his tail tucked, follow the chase as best as you can and call your dog to you with whistles, hand claps happy noises, etc. Once your dog finds his way to you the chase (and bullying) will end.
- If your dog is being mobbed or targeted by other dogs or being bullied by another dog or dogs, simply walk between the dogs and either herd the bully dog away or do a "Superman" stance between your dog and the bully dog. This should diffuse the situation. Then touch and praise your dog once the situation is diffused.
- If your dog continues to get bullied, rolled, victimized, targeted, mounted, chased, etc., remove your dog from the park and go home.
- If your dog begins to show opportunistic behaviors like being a bully, immediately stop the behavior by getting a hold of him and denying his freedom for several seconds – like a time out. If it starts again, remove him from the dog park and go home.
- If your dog is the bully of the park, stop taking him to the dog park. He should not play in this type of setting!

Dog parks are meant to be a great place for dogs to run freely and interact with their owners. They are not meant to be a place to let animal instincts run wild while owners sit on benches or stand in circles and socialize. There are plenty of people present to exert control and influence over the dogs to keep their

instincts in check. Unfortunately, that isn't what happens. Instead, the balance of control shifts to the dogs and things go awry. It is because of our lack of supervision and complete lack of understanding or perhaps acceptance that dogs are not fuzzy little people. We cannot forget that unlike humans dogs lack a conscience. They do not experience the same thoughts and emotions that humans do. They are complex mammals that have evolved from wolves with hard-wired instincts and it is our responsibility to set them up for success.

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