



## **Off-Leash Dog Parks – Risk Control Best Practices**

A well-placed and well-maintained off-leash dog park is an amenity that can be enjoyed by many residents, both dog owners and dog lovers. To take full advantage of this public offering, the Safety Director offers the following best practices.

Location & Layout – Choose a site with the following advice in mind:

- The size of the dog park should be as large as feasible. Larger parks minimize overcrowding which can cause fearfulness, aggression, or other undesirable reactions in the dogs. However, the owner of the park must be able to adequately maintain the size of the space.
- Separate parks for small and larger dogs are recommended.
- Avoid locating the park immediately adjacent to residential areas. If the park must be located close to a residential area, consider creating noise buffers such as shrubbery, fencing or earthen berms.
- Avoid conflicts with environmental concerns such as disturbing wildlife, run-off, and other sensitive areas.
- The chosen site should have a water source and a source of electricity if the park will be open into the evening. Lighting could present a challenge to neighbors.
- Consider assembling an ad hoc committee consisting of local veterinarians and dog clubs.

### Park Features & Amenities

- Ensure adequate parking adjacent to the park and accessibility for individuals with disabilities, and maintenance vehicles.
- Drinking water and shade – Dogs cannot cool themselves as efficiently as humans and should have access to drinking water and shade. Dogs play strenuously in dog parks and if there is no water available, dogs may suffer from heatstroke, which can be fatal. Additionally, there should be shady areas where dogs can lay down, cool themselves, and rest before continuing their play.
- Electricity is recommended if the hours of operation extend into the evening.
- A 6-foot high perimeter galvanized or vinyl-coated chain link fence is recommended by the American Kennel Club and several veterinary associations. The American Pet Dog Trainers recommend avoiding 90° corners to help timid dogs feeling ‘cornered’ by overly enthusiastic or aggressive dogs.
- Fences should be provided with a double gated entry to allow owners to unleash the dog(s) before entering the open park area. Two or three entrances are preferable. Entrances should be visually shielded from dogs that are already in the park. Dogs tend to gather at entrances and exits, arousal goes up, and incidents can easily occur.
- Materials for cleaning up after dogs (bags and garbage cans) are essential for basic good health for both dogs and humans. Many canine diseases are spread through feces, and feces attract insects which can spread disease to humans.

Safety of the dogs and people rank as the primary concern of park managers and owners. The Safety Director recommends the following rules be predominately posted in the parking lot and at the entrance(s) to the park(s).

- Park hours
- Owners are responsible for their dogs and any injuries caused by them
- Owners are responsible for cleaning up after their dogs.
- Dogs must be properly licensed and current on all vaccinations.
- Female dogs in heat are not permitted in the park.
- Children under 14 years old must be accompanied by an adult. Children should always be closely supervised by a responsible adult. *Consider not permitting children under 8 years old in the dog park.*
- Owners are NOT permitted to run inside the dog area or get involved in dog play.
- The park users must have their dogs under voice control.
- Owners must carry their leash on them at all times.
- No more than 3 dogs per adult user.
- Dogs that are aggressive to other dogs or people are prohibited from the park.
- Dogs must be on-leash until inside the first gate of the entrance.
- Dog food, treats, and toys are not permitted in the dog park.
- Contact information for maintenance concerns or emergency situations.

Information Signs –The Safety Director recommends the following advice from dog professionals be posted in gathering areas in the park. This may help educate users on dog behaviors, leading to a more successful park.

- ***Dog(s) bullying another dog*** — Although this will happen occasionally, if it occurs often, aggressive and / or fearful behaviors are more likely to develop in some dogs because of exposure to the dog park. Individual dogs may bully a dog that they perceive to be weaker or more submissive. Please be on the lookout for this type of behavior and do not allow it to continue. By stopping the behavior, you are teaching your dog how to behave appropriately in a social situation.
- Aggressive, overly assertive, overly unruly, and under-socialized dogs should not utilize the park. A dog that displays such forceful behavior, even before aggressive to the point of fighting with other dogs, can cause other dogs to become excessively fearful. Please monitor your dog so all dogs can enjoy the park
- Young puppies or fearful dogs are discouraged from utilizing the park, as they may be made more fearful by highly assertive dogs, highly interactive dogs, or rough play. A fearful dog may snap or bite as a way of defending itself, and perhaps develop problems that can be seen outside of the confines of a dog park.
- ***Dogs forming loose packs*** - If dogs begin forming loose packs and no one breaks them up, there is a potential for serious behavior problems. These dogs may gang up on weaker dogs and may even physically attack them. If, on a regular basis, the dogs (particularly if they are always the same dogs) continue to pack together, owners should take steps to disrupt ‘pack behavior’ in their dog.
- Children and dogs thrive together. However, in a dog park, children should be taught certain ‘home’ behaviors may be misinterpreted by strange dogs. Do not assume that just because your child is "used to" getting knocked over by a dog, that your child is safe with unfamiliar dogs. Children should not:
  - Get involved in dog play.
  - Feed unfamiliar dogs and should NEVER take anything from a dog's mouth.
  - Approach unfamiliar dogs without the owner's permission.
  - Yell or do anything that will excite the dogs.

Please contact your Safety Director if you have additional questions.