

Dog Parks and Their Benefits

The Humane Society of the United States:

A dog park is a designated public area where dogs can safely and legally socialize, play, and exercise off-leash. Since the 1970's, many dog parks have been established across the United States. They are becoming increasingly popular thanks to responsible pet owners and community agencies and officials who realize their important role in improving not only the quality of life for dogs, but for all of us.

How does a dog park work?

A dog park is usually supervised by an association of dog owners whose members can exert peer pressure to enforce the rules of the dog park. The dog park group monitors the park's use, cleans up, raises funds for amenities, and serves as communications liaison with the city, neighborhood, and dog owners. In some cases, the core dog owner's group may raise the funds necessary to build the fence, supply pooper scoopers, post signs, etc. However, funding may come from a corporate sponsorship or from the park department, and the government agency providing the land may provide trash containers and pickup, benches, water fountains, and maintenance of the grass. Some dog parks charge a usage or permit fee.

How do dogs benefit?

In the past the hunting, herding, and guarding roles of dogs provided opportunities for companionship with other dogs and humans, as well as plenty of vigorous exercise. Exercise, in addition to improving the physical health of our dogs, also



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improves their mental health. Today many dogs spend a large portion of their day alone and inactive, and the stress of this abnormal lifestyle can result in many undesirable outcomes: obesity, self-mutilation, digging, chewing, soiling, barking, escaping, etc.

Dogs are social animals, and those who are allowed to interact with other dogs and people, and taught appropriate behavior in social groups, are better behaved and more likely to be included in other activities with human companions. Posted dog park rules usually prohibit individual dogs with a known history of dangerous behavior and require owners not leave their dog unattended; thus, any dogs that exhibit dangerous behavior are removed immediately, and dogs learn that aggressive behavior is unacceptable.

How do people benefit?

Dog parks provide an important recreational outlet for humans too by bringing together dog lovers of all ages, health, social, and economic status. With dogs as social lubricants encouraging conversations among strangers, people in the community get to know each other and share information about responsible pet ownership. Dog parks enable people with disabilities and senior citizens who cannot always walk their dogs a safe alternative. By spending quality time with their pet at the dog park, owners strengthen the bond with their pet.



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Dog parks contain animals in public areas away from people who prefer not to interact with them, and dogs who have had the benefit of dog park socialization and exercise are better behaved when encountered elsewhere.

How does the community benefit?

A dog park increases public health. Toileting and marking behavior that is stimulated by exercise or the presence of other dogs is contained in dog parks. A fenced dog park prevents injuries that befall dogs running loose and because the dogs are better behaved and controlled, there should be less dog-related problems elsewhere in the park or the community at large. By their presence, groups of dog owners and their dogs may help deter crime. A dog park makes it easier for a city to enforce its leash law since owners who have access to a dog park have no excuse for letting their dogs run loose. Since behavioral problems are often cited by dog owners who relinquish their dogs, dog parks may alleviate overpopulation at shelters.

AT A GLANCE

Imagine places where dogs can play, exercise, and socialize safely and legally off-leash. In the United States and in other countries around the world, these places - commonly known as “dog parks,” “dog runs,” or “free running areas” - are rising in popularity and demand. Commonly managed by users in cooperation with local



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government, dog parks may or may not be fenced and may range in size from one-quarter to more than 50 acres. The planning and perseverance required to establish a dog park is offset by the many benefits it brings to people and their canine friends.



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How to Establish a Dog Park

The Humane Society of the United States:

Local dog associations with a core group of dedicated people who will make a long-term commitment to establishing and maintaining a dog park have been the major impetus behind their creation. These groups gather public support, petition the city council, and plan the specifics of a proposed dog park.

How do I gather support?

In order to gauge public interest in establishing a dog park, distribute surveys (see sample) to neighborhood dog owners, dog-related clubs, local humane societies, veterinarians, pet supply stores, boarding kennels, trainers, and groomers. Contact community representatives, park department officials, and media, and ask them for their support to establish a dog park in your area. Write letters and e-mails (see sample), telephone, and circulate petitions (see samples), and seek out endorsements from veterinarians, animal control agencies, community leaders, animal behaviorists, dog trainers, and established dog park groups (see sample quotes). Encourage supporters to attend and speak up at community board and community affairs meetings. Find a site. A dog park may be developed in a low-usage area of an established public park, other unused public land, or purchased or leased private land (see Suggested Dog Park Features).

How do I effectively present a proposal?

Talk to people in your community's planning department or the parks department. Present all the benefits of a dog park (see Dog Park Statement). Be prepared to discuss their concerns about liability issues pertaining to dog fights and dogs

attacking humans, feces control, noise, and supervision of the park (see Countering Objections to Dog Parks).

Most city ordinances contain “dog at large” clauses that prohibit dogs from running off-leash in any public area. To legally establish a dog park, this clause must be amended. This amendment, giving a general description of the dog park and reviewing its rules, should be approved by the Park and Recreation Department. If the City Council approves the amendment, the City Attorney will put the clause into effect. Work with your local animal control agency to ensure that they are supportive of these amendments and will assist with enforcement if needed.

AT A GLANCE

Don't give up. It may take several years of active campaigning for the dog park to be approved by community board members, park department officials, and other relevant community representatives. And it doesn't end there. An on-going commitment by the dog group association will be required to help maintain the dog park. If dogs could vote, they would definitely be in favor of dog parks. Speak up for them. It's their world too!

Countering Objections to Dog Parks

The Humane Society of the United States:

Resistance may come from non-dog owners, dog park neighbors, or council members, and it is always important to listen to any objections. If they are well founded, solutions can be sought, and if they are based on misinformation, calm discussions can educate.

What about dog fights?

Most dogs are not aggressive when outside their own territory. Since dogs with a history of dangerous behavior are not permitted in the dog park, and owners are present to remove their dog at the first sign of dangerous behavior, fighting will be minimized. A National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) study showed no incidents of dog fights in dog parks resulting in libel suits.

What about dangerous behavior toward people?

The same NRPA study showed no incidents involving dogs attacking humans. Most states have “dog bite statutes” that make the dog owner legally liable for any injury or damage that their dog cause, and waivers may be inserted in city ordinances that make the owner take full responsibility for their dog’s actions in the dog park. The implied consent waiver should be posted in conspicuous locations in the dog park.

Won’t it be noisy?

A dog park should provide a buffer zone between the park and the nearest neighbors in order to cut down on noise and odors. Since barking is not common when dogs play and posted dog park rules require pet owners be present, barking can be controlled.

Who will remove dog feces?



One of the most common complaints to dogs in parks is their feces. Toileting and marking behavior that is stimulated by exercise or the presence of other dogs is contained in dog parks. Most dog parks post rules that require dog owners to clean up after their pets, and there is often a sponsoring group associated with the dog park to provide an example to other dog owners, educate them, and take responsibility for picking up overlooked feces. Necessary clean-up tools, including biodegradable bags, and pooper scoopers are often provided on site, and many parks provide trash containers and pick up.

Who will supervise the dog park?

A responsible association of dog owners whose members can exert peer pressure to enforce the rules is the key to success. The dog park group monitors the park's use, cleans up, raises funds for amenities, and serves as communications liaison with the city, neighborhood, and dog owners.

Suggested Dog Park Features

The Humane Society of the United States:

Dog parks across the country have learned by trail and error what features are important to a successful off-leash area. Here are some guidelines that may help you.

- 1-5 acres since smaller parks may experience overcrowding problems, while larger parks may be too big to be well-controlled
- Good drainage to prevent muddy conditions that make the area unusable
- 5-6 foot fence to prevent dogs from jumping over the fence
- Double gate system to prevent dogs from escaping when other dogs and their owners are entering or leaving the dog park
- Water fountain for thirsty dogs
- Covered containers for disposal of dog feces and feces-removal supplies to promote cleanup
- Shade trees to provide protection from summer heat for dogs and pet owners
- Central, well-lighted location to insure the safety of dog owners and their dogs
- Wheelchair access so that all people can use the dog park
- Benches for pet owners to relax with each other and observe their dogs
- Signs to clearly display rules of the dog park and its boundaries
- Parking lot close by to minimize distance pet owner and dog must traverse to get to dog park
- Buffer zone, such as hedges, trees, and land forms, between park and neighbors to minimize noise and maximize aesthetic enjoyment

Suggested Dog Park Rules

The Humane Society of the United States:

A successful dog park needs rules that are easy to understand and visibly posted. Dog park rules are usually drawn up by the park department and the affiliated dog park association whose members provide an example to other dog owners and exert peer pressure to enforce the rules.

- **Dog feces must be cleaned up by owners.** Due to the concentration of dogs in one area, feces must be removed in order to prevent transmission of parasites, reduce odor, and promote general cleanliness. Many dog parks supply bags to pick up feces for free or at minimal cost which encourages compliance.
- **Dog owners must be in the park, within view, and be able to maintain voice control of their dogs at all times.** This encourages dog owners to seek some level of training for their dog and promotes appropriate dog behavior through strict supervision. Owners are present to observe and clean up when their dog defecates.
- **Dogs with a known individual history of dangerous behavior are not permitted in the park.** This discourages aggressive behavior. No dog should be excluded based solely on breed.
- **Dogs must be removed from the dog park at the first sign of dangerous behavior toward people or other dogs in the park.** Responsible dog owners must teach their dogs that such behaviors are unacceptable.
- **Dog owners must have a leash in hand at all times.** This enables the dog



owner to remove a dog from the park for any inappropriate behavior.

- **Small children should not be brought into the dog park.** Small children can be harmed inadvertently by a playful dog. Chasing may be viewed as a threat to a dog, and running away from and high-pitched screaming may trigger hunting instincts in a dog. A responsible dog owner needs to devote his full attention to watching his dog.
- **Dogs should be leashed while entering and exiting the dog park.** It is important for safety and legal reasons to obey leash laws whenever your dog is not in the boundaries of the dog park.
- **Female dogs in heat are prohibited from entering the dog park.** The presence of a dog in heat may promote fights among unneutered males. This threatens the dogs as well as their owners who must break up the fights. Unwanted pregnancies may also result.
- **Fill any hole your dog digs.** Dogs and people in the dog park may be injured if they step into a hole. Designated digging areas within the dog park may help preserve the landscape and train dogs to dig only in specified areas.
- **Puppies and dogs must be properly inoculated, healthy, and parasite free.** This protects all dogs and promotes responsible veterinary care. For puppies less than 4 months of age without full vaccination protection, socialization with friends' or neighbors' dogs with known vaccination histories and temperament may be safer.
- **Dogs must be licensed.** This promotes rabies vaccination of dogs and their licensing as required by law.



- **Limit three dogs per visit.** It would be difficult for one adult to monitor more than three dogs.
- **Do not bring food into the dog park.** Fights may occur over food, and dogs may get sick if they eat foods that are not part of their usual diet.

For More Information

The Humane Society of the United States:

For more information about dog parks, refer to the resources below.

[So You Want to Build a Dog Park? A Comprehensive Guide for Municipalities and Private Entities.](#) Author: Susyn Stecchi Information on how dog parks add value and quality of life to communities; what other communities did to get their dog parks; what to take into consideration when building a dog park; how to obtain or construct your own Dog Park equipment; and miscellaneous information, interesting tidbits, and generally unclassifiable items. Available online.

[Establishing a Dog Park in your Community, AKC:](#)

<http://www.akc.org/pdfs/GLEG01.pdf>

Magazine Articles

Adelman, Beth. "Dogs and Parks." *AKC Gazette*, August 1996 v. 113, n. 8, pg 34-35.

Battiata, Mary. "Lassie Go Home." *Washington Post Magazine*, May 30, 1999, pg 8-13, 23-27.

Bourbeau, Joanne. "Dog Parks: Can a Place That Lets Rover Roam Help Your Shelter?" *Animal Sheltering* May-June 1998, pg 19-21.

Burnham, Patricia. "Dog Parks." *Dog World*, June 1991 v. 76, n. 6, pg. 10-12.

Crane, Candace. "Off-Leash Havens, Canine Heavens." *Animals*, March/April 1990, pg 28-31.

Elmer, Irene. "Dog Parks." *Dog Fancy*, July 1990 v. 21, n. 7, pg 38-41.

Kawczynska, Claudia. "Dog Power." *The Bark*, No. 8, pg 33-37.

Kochan, Maureen. "America's Best Dog Parks," *Dog Fancy*, July 2006, pg 42-43.

Marar, Eve. "Point Isabel: A Playground Made In Paradise." *Dog World*, August 1997 v. 82, n. 8, pg 34-37.

Moran, Peggy. "Take Me Out To The Dog Park." *Dog World*, April 1999, v. 84, n. 4, pg 42-47.

Skoczek, Marianne. "The Ruff Part of Town." *Pawprint*, Summer 1998, vol. 23, issue 2, Peninsula Humane Society.



Wolch, Jennifer R. and Rowe, Stacy. "Companions in the Park." *Landscape*, 1992
v. 31, n. 3, pg 16-23.



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Internet Sites

American Dog Trainers Network:

<http://www.inch.com/~dogs/howto.html>

How to Establish A Successful Dog Run in Your Community (with useful links).

DogPark.Com:

www.dogpark.com

A comprehensive list of dog parks across the U.S., pet friendly accommodations, tips for starting and maintaining a dog park, and more.

Dog Play

<http://www.dogplay.com/Activities/dogpark.html>

Dog Parks, Dog Runs and Off Leash Play. What is a Dog Park? How Do I Start a Dog Park? Where Do I Get More Information? How Can I Find a Dog Park Near Me? (with many useful links).

Marin County Dog Parks

<http://www.marincountyparks.org/Depts/PK/Divisions/Parks/Main/Dogs.aspx>

Local dog parks, benefits, group role, things to consider, dog park design, people etiquette.

Freeplay.org:

www.freeplay.org

Supporters of off-leash areas in Los Angeles. Lists off-leash areas nationwide by state.

Statistical information and blueprints for dog parks in the San Francisco area:

www.sfdog.org

The official site of ArlingtonDogs;

www.arlingtondogs.org

Municipal Research & Service Center of Washington:

<http://www.mrsc.org/subjects/parks/offleash.aspx>



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