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GUEST ESSAY

Dog Parks Are Great for People. Too Bad They're Terrible for Dogs.

Aug. 6, 2023

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For urban dog owners with a live-wire canine bouncing off the apartment walls, an enclosed dog park can feel like an oasis, offering off-the-leash exercise, an outlet for excess energy, a social experience for the dog and, often, for the humans, too. In fact, dog parks are perfect, save for one small thing: They are bad for dogs.

Rather than think of them as oases, we'd be wiser to think of dog parks as undersupervised and vaguely dirty watering holes during thunderstorms when there's a good chance of lightning: high risk and best avoided.

Debates on this subject run deep among dog people, frequently dividing along shocked-that-you-would and shocked-that-you-wouldn't lines. Every once in a while, these debates flare into full view on social media.

The dogs can seem divided, too. To be sure, some seem to love dog parks, pulling at the leash to get there sooner and frolicking energetically for as long as they're allowed to stay. But look closely, and you'll see all the dogs that get discombobulated. For many, the kerfuffle of the dog park is simply too stimulating: all that sniffing and getting sniffed, the rolling and ruckusing, the prodding and the chasing. Those loopy circles that dogs make in a dog park, called the zoomies? Those could be playful, or they could very well be your dog screaming, "I just can't take it anymore!"

As for the dogs that aren't going berserk, they're often busy coping as best they can, clinging to the edges of the park or sniffing at pebbles. Dogs are social animals, yes, and need exposure to other animals. But much like us, they're not necessarily well suited to random interactions with a rotating cast of strangers, each with disparate social skills and reactive tendencies.

This mismatch between temperaments among random dogs — their varied abilities at handling conflict, coupled with the often sporadic attention being paid to them by their owners — can make for a highly combustible situation. Even small doses of stress can take up to three days to drain out of a dog's system, and all that excess stimulation can lead to eruptions of seemingly inexplicable bad behavior long after the dog and its owner have gone home.

My first dog, Ruggles, and I went to a dog park ritually every morning, as much for me to see other dog owners as to let my dog play. For humans, dog parks are like miniature town greens — except muddy and smelly — where people can go to gossip, swap dog care tips and enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded folks who are not embarrassed to share cute animal photos. Some people have even discovered romance at a dog park. I found a real estate lawyer.

It was all wonderful until my dog's ear was ripped off and the attacking dog's owner refused to pay the vet bill — or even remove the dog from the park. Such incidents are all too common.

When I was raising my goofily hyper Labrador, Sammy, I remember reading dog-training books with page-long lists of all the things I had to deliberately introduce him to, such as pointed hats, men with beards and open umbrellas. These books also insisted that my dog should meet dozens of new people before he turned 4 months old. This philosophy — that young dogs need to be socialized, and quickly — morphs naturally into a handy rationale for going to the dog park, once the dog is old enough. (Dog parks typically require vaccinations for dogs, but that is rarely enforced.) This kind of exposure and stimulation is important for young dogs, but it's best administered gently, in small doses. There's absolutely no reason any of it should lead to hanging out in a thunderdome of rowdy pooches.

Then there's the promise of happy exhaustion — another dog park myth. Who hasn't heard the mantra that a tired dog is a good dog? But tired dogs, like tired people, can be time bombs: stressed, worn out and often unable to catch up on the 14 or so hours of rest a day that dogs require to keep an even keel.

The solution to overstressed dogs may also be the solution for overstressed dog owners: Skip the dog park. Stop worrying so much about socializing your dogs in exactly the right way. They may enjoy running around with other breeds sometimes, but studies suggest the truth is that they'd be happiest just playing with you.

A 1996 study by the experimental psychologists David S. Tuber, Michael B. Hennessy, Suzanne Sanders and Julia A. Miller looked at levels of the stress hormone cortisol when dogs were put in a novel environment to see what soothed them more — the presence of a kennel mate or a human caretaker. If you're surprised by the fact that the human soothed the dogs more, just think about how they often react when you get home at the end of the day. They nearly collapse with joy and relief.

Dogs want to be with us wherever we are. If they didn't, they'd still be wolves. That goes for parks and city streets, which are great places for dogs to explore. So forgo the dog park: You have nothing to lose but your urban guilt — and maybe a real estate lawyer or two.

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