

## The Truth About Dog Parks



Many people take their dogs to dog parks because it is a convenient way to socialize and exercise their companion. Indeed, many dogs love going to dog parks. However, taking *any* dog to a dog park that is occupied by many unfamiliar dogs isn't a good idea for several reasons, and it's an even worse idea if you own a Pit Bull.

When you take your dog to a dog park, you know nothing about the other dogs at the park or their owners. You don't know if all the dogs play nicely with others or have triggers (such as toys or food). Don't assume that only "friendly" dogs go to dog parks. In fact, many owners bring dogs to dog parks that are not appropriate for such an environment, mistakenly believing that dogs will "work out" their differences through normal social interactions. Some owners just don't care whether their dog

plays nicely and consider dog parks an easy way to exercise their dogs.



Even "dog friendly" dogs can get into fights at dog parks. The fact is, if you take your dog to a dog park on a regular basis, odds are you've seen a dog fight. Even if you haven't yet seen a fight, frequently going to a dog park is like playing Russian Roulette. It only takes one bad incident to leave your dog with serious injuries and/or a lifetime of dog reactivity issues.

The issue with dog parks is heightened for Pit Bulls, not because they can't play nicely with other dogs, but because of both their terrier nature and the misconceptions others have about them. Pit Bulls are part terrier, and most terrier breeds are somewhat

reactive toward other dogs. That's not to say that all Pit Bulls are dog-reactive (in fact, many love other dogs). However, what it *does* mean is that a negative experience can have a lasting impact on your dog, and that impact may be heightened due to your dog's terrier nature.

Pit Bulls don't mature until about 3 years of age. During that time, it is extremely important to make sure they have positive, supervised interactions with other dogs. If a young, impressionable dog has a very bad experience, such as a serious dog fight, it can color his attitude about other dogs for the rest of his life--whereas before all dogs were friends, now dogs may be a threat.

Two real-life examples show the problem with dog parks.

The first example happened in northern California. One dog, a nine-month old Pit Bull, was romping around the dog park chasing after his ball. A much larger golden-colored animal with a medium coat (the owner called it a Redbone Coonhound-Mastiff mix) charged across the dog park and attacked the Pit Bull.

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The Coonhound latched on to the smaller Pit Bull, and both owners tried desperately to get it to release the Pit Bull. The Coonhound bit the owner of the Pit Bull during the scuffle. When the dogs were finally separated, it was obvious the young Pit Bull needed a veterinarian. To his credit, the owner of the attacking dog went with the Pit Bull owner to a veterinarian's office and paid the bill, which amounted to over \$1,000 after surgery to repair an internally mangled ear. Many times, owners whose dogs attack other dogs take off quickly to avoid liability, leaving the other dog owner stuck with the vet bill.

The second case comes out of Miami-Dade, Florida and involves two Labrador Retrievers (in perfect irony, Miami-Dade banned Pit Bulls). One dog -- we'll call him Brody to protect the innocent -- was happily playing with his ball when another Labrador Retriever went after the ball. The two dogs got into a fight, leaving the interloping Labrador Retriever with puncture wounds in his mouth and lip.

Aside from the fact that a negative experience at a dog park can affect your dog's attitude toward dogs from that point forward, there is another great reason to avoid taking your Pit Bull to dog parks. Owners who bring their dogs to such parks often don't pay attention to their dogs. They're busy on their cell phones, reading, or chatting with other dog owners. When a fight breaks out, people look up, not having seen which dog started the fight, and when everyone sees a Pit Bull fighting with another dog, the vast majority of them will believe the Pit Bull "attacked" the other dog.

Without solid eye-witnesses or video evidence, your dog, the Pit Bull, will likely get the blame, and you may end up paying the other person's vet bills. If legal action commences, your dog may end up euthanized, even though he was the victim. Breed discrimination is a sad and unjust reality for Pit Bull owners.

If a dog park is the only fenced area available for your dog to engage in off-leash play, consider going during off hours when there are no other users of the park. Many cities will allow you to reserve a dog park for a few hours, so you can get one or two appropriate dog buddies that have already been properly introduced to your dog and bring them (and their owners, of course!) along for some off-leash, supervised playtime.

In fact, it's a good idea to try to arrange play dates with your dog if he or she gets along well with other dogs. Just make sure your dog plays with other dogs he or she has already been properly introduced to and, of course, make sure any canine playmate has an appropriate dog-friendly attitude. Of course, all dog play dates should be well-supervised by people who know how to safely break up any altercations that may occur--and that goes for any dog, any breed.

The final issue with dog parks is disease! Dog parks are frequented by hundreds of dogs, which means your dog will undoubtedly be exposed to all sorts of contagious diseases and parasites. Play it safe. Avoid dog parks.