

**K9 Elementary**

Sometimes dogs do silly things and just need someone with understanding...

...and our best friends aren't always the best ones to turn to...

...but, help may be rushing to greet you. I'm just a call away.

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# Is Your Dog A Dog Park Dog?

By Kelly Ryan

**A**s a trainer, I am frequently asked how I feel about dog parks. My answer is, "I don't know, how does your dog feel about dog parks?"

Dog parks can be great places for your dog. They can meet and play with other dogs, run in large areas free from their leash and safe from traffic hazards. They can meet all kinds of new people of different colours, ages and sizes, and some of those suckers...er umm people even dish out treats!

**Dog parks can also be dangerous places for your dog.** Most dog parks have rules posted requiring the dogs to be vaccinated and excluding "aggressive" dogs. That's great in theory. Have you ever had to show proof of your dog's vaccinations before entering a dog park? Not every dog owner is responsible maintaining their dog's vaccinations. Between, sharing kisses, water dishes, and toys, dogs who frequent dog parks run the potential for being exposed to worms, giardia, and other parasites and diseases.

Also, who decides which dogs are aggressive? Is a dog playing rough and very vocal, or is he truly exhibiting signs of aggression? Are you prepared to make the distinction? Is any other owner in the park? If your dog is on the receiving end of the rough treatment, does it matter to you?

Now you might be thinking that dog parks aren't such a great idea. So, I'll tell you that I regularly go to dog parks with my dog. I began because we lived in an apartment, and she is a high-energy dog who needs to run. I have continued, because it is a great place for us to work on training with distractions. Once she had solidly learned a basic behaviour, we went to the dog park to work on it there. Not only was this great for her, it dramatically improved our bond. Which is, after all, why I got a dog in the first place. Also, it has given me a dog who'll pay attention to me and work for me despite the presence of other dogs. Nice bonus.

However, to enjoy the advantages of a dog park, I had to make a few choices. Initially, part of why the dog park seemed so great was I could let my dog run around and burn some energy with other dogs, and I didn't have to do that much work. After a full day at work, I'm not really all that excited about playing two hours of fetch! I quickly realized though, that going to the dog park with my dog was not about me sitting on the picnic bench while she ran around. It was still about me paying attention to, and spending time, with my dog. I needed to know where she was and what she was up to...at all times. This is not only for purposes of poo



Walking Dogs at Manly Lagoon

patrol, but also because I wanted to know she wasn't starting any trouble, no other dogs were starting any trouble with her, and she wasn't barking at people or chasing kids. Although I do not think dog parks are an appropriate place for young children, they are there. It's my job as a responsible owner to make sure nothing unpleasant happens between my dog and the toddler walking around with cookie residue on her hands and face. This is your responsibility when you go to the dog park.

Each and every time I go to the dog park, I assess the other dogs and owners in the park. If I see anything I don't like, either before I get in the park or while I'm there, we're out of there.

**The Threshold Area.** Some dog parks have a double gated area to take your dog off-leash before you are both actually in the park. First, take your dog off-leash in this area. DO NOT walk into the park with your dog on leash. When you walk into the park with your dog on-leash and all the other dogs are off-leash, you are potentially creating a number of problems. First, you may be affecting your dog's body language. When a dog is pulling on leash, all their body is going forward and they are telling other dogs they are a challenge...even if they don't actually intend to be. Second, by keeping your dog on-leash when all the other dogs are off-leash, you are putting your dog at an enormous disadvantage. If your dog feels the need to get away from the onslaught of dogs, she has no way to. Being unable to get away, she may feel the need to defend herself.

**The Rush.** Without fail, when you and your dog arrive at the dog park, many other dogs will rush the gate to greet you. How friendly of them. The problem here is that dogs in dog parks form loose packs, and they will want to quickly assess where your dog fits in that pack. This may lead to some conflicts, particularly if you have a fairly dominant dog. Also, the sheer number of dogs at the gate may overwhelm your dog, and again, she may feel the need to defend herself. One way to avoid that particular pitfall is to just wait it out. If you stay in the gated area until all, or most, of the dogs have gone back to running around, you can avoid a lot of potential problems. This may mean you have to wait for quite a while, but it will make the dog park experience much more pleasant for your dog, so it is worth it. Also, if your dog is gathering at the gate as new dogs arrive, either call her off or go get her. Let the new dog have a chance to get in the park with a minimum of problems.

**What Is Your Dog Saying?** Pay attention to your dog at the dog park. Be ready to accept that your dog may not be an appropriate dog to be in the dog park or may not enjoy the company of other dogs or that many other dogs. Let me just tell you right now, dog parks are great fun for SOME dogs. They are a nightmare for others.



Blackwattle Bay Park

