



Why 'socialisation' is often the cause of behavioural problems!

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Socialisation is one of the most misunderstood areas of dog behaviour and training, sadly to the detriment of many of our beloved dogs. Whilst socialisation is the most important thing we can do developmentally for our dog, this needs to be carried out very carefully. Errors in doing this can backfire and cause a dog to become overly timid or aggressive.

The need for puppies to socialise with other dogs by being off lead and playing hard has been grossly exaggerated and as a result, many dogs end up with behavioural problems through being thrown into a situation they are not ready for, usually at off leash dog parks. This can be catastrophic for a young puppy between 8-16 weeks, and cause lifelong fear based problems that can be difficult to undo. Dog parks and poorly run off-lead puppy classes are most often where the trouble starts when we take a case history: A

common thread in most dog-dog aggression case histories, are reports by owners that 'Rover was a bit scared of other dogs so we took him to dog parks all the time to socialise him, he was scared and never really got used to it, he liked some dogs at first but just seemed to get worse and worse' or "Jemma" spent almost the whole time in puppy class under a chair, after other dogs kept chasing her around the room'. So what does good socialisation look like? Socialisation should be confidence building, not overwhelming.

THE TOP 7 MOST COMMON DOG PARK DISASTERS!

1. Dogs with poor greeting behaviours

Too many owners do not recognise if their dog has a play-deficit, or is a bully. Some dogs are not sensitive to other dogs giving clear cut-off signals in the hope that the bolshy dog backs off. This is the most common area trouble begins.

2. Scared dogs with tail between their legs who are fearful but tolerate other dogs investigating them for fear of retribution if they react. Owners often do not recognise that their dog is not enjoying the park.

3. Proximity sensitive dogs who can tolerate dogs at a distance but become reactive if a dog comes up to say hello.

4. Dogs getting overwhelmed by 3-4 dogs at a time crowding them as they enter the park.

5. Over-aroused dogs chasing other over-aroused dogs: This conditioning of over-arousal in the dog park often builds up to aggression over time.

6. Dogs not listening to their owners coming when called: Who would want their dog practicing that on a daily basis? Part of the condition of allowing your dog off lead at the park is that they are still under 'effective control' something rarely seen.

7. Object guarders who will attack other dogs that innocently try to join in their game of ball. I am shocked at how often owners knowingly put other dogs at risk in this scenario.

Proper socialisation introduces a puppy or dog to something new, gradually, in a safe environment, at a level they can handle, ensuring the dog has a good experience. The dog must have an escape route and be successful in backing away if overwhelmed. They should be allowed to return and investigate or interact at his or her own pace. We gradually increase the difficulty, from quiet, friendly dogs to more bolshy dogs once the puppy is comfortable at each level. Dog Parks are not for every dog: Many owners treat dog parks as off-responsibility areas and take inappropriate dogs there to exercise them, with little to no supervision and no thought for the effect their unruly dogs might have on the others. Before unleashing a load of boisterous dogs on your newly adopted dog, make sure that your

dog actually enjoys the company of other dogs. Not all dogs do! Watch the behaviour of any dogs at the park before taking your dog in. Many dogs, (just like people who are uncomfortable in crowds) really do not enjoy being descended on by a bunch of bolshy, adolescent Labradors for example, and would much prefer a quiet leash walk with you in the street. Some dogs would just prefer that you go to the park in quiet times. Almost every time I go to a dog park during busy times, I am horrified by what I see.

Be your dog's advocate:

Your dog relies on you as his caretaker!

We need to be aware of what is going on for our dogs emotionally when they are out with us. **Never let anyone (dog or human) force themselves on your dog if he looks apprehensive or overwhelmed. If your dog looks uncomfortable, see if you can assist him and take the pressure off by increasing his distance from what upsets him.**

Talk to him in a happy voice, show him you are not upset or bothered by it at all. You

want your dog to have confidence in you as a reliable caretaker who won't put him into a situation where he is frightened, overwhelmed or unable to cope. I choose quiet times to take my dogs and always scan the area before going in. If I see anything that worries me about the dogs already there, I walk to the other side of the park, and keep away, or take them elsewhere.

It goes both ways, if your dog gets over-excited and doesn't leave dogs alone that do not wish to play, don't let him persist in annoying them, particularly ones who are afraid. Once a puppy has had lots of good experiences with other dogs and has gained confidence with them, they have what we refer to as 'padding'. This simply means, they have a solid bank of wonderful positive interactions with dogs that, should they have an unfortunate incident with a particular dog, it will appear to them to be something of a 'freak' incident and won't affect their general level of optimism when meeting the next dog.

