

**GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE
OF SUCCESSFUL OFF-LEASH DOG EXERCISE AREAS**

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General Comments

There are many perspectives and types of information that need to be taken into consideration when developing and managing off-leash dog parks that are successful in terms of harmony with the surrounding community as well as with the park users. Community support and involvement is integral to this process, especially in promoting a harmonious relationship with the neighbors of the park. Maintenance, along with the proper selection of a location, is essential in the continued success of a park. Indeed, our research, based on a study of 17 off-leash dog parks, profiles maintenance of the park as probably the single most important determinant of success. Although our research did not show a statistically significant correlation of dog park club involvement and perceived success, the correlation was positive. Managers of parks repeatedly stressed the importance of an active dog park club, and we strongly recommend that these clubs be involved in the planning process, as well as helping to maintain an ongoing relationship with the management of the park. The lines of communication must remain open between the municipality or organization managing the park and the community to promptly address actual or perceived problems, and to profile the benefits that a dog park can bring to the community. Under various headings below, we describe suggested guidelines that should be considered in establishing and managing an off-leash dog park. The specific recommendations are a reflection of conclusions from data analysis of our study of off-leash dog parks, as well as a reflection of repeated comments from interviewed managers and park users.

The topics discussed first involve the primary concerns expressed by community officials, namely safety to humans and other dogs, noise generated from a concentration of barking dogs, and sanitation problems from the build-up of feces. As it turns out, these concerns do not represent the issues deserving of the most attention, because problems in these areas appear to be relatively infrequent, at least in the dog parks that we visited.

Some community decision-makers and park managers mentioned a concern about possible disturbance of wildlife or native plants. Our study focused mainly on urban parks and disturbance of wildlife in these parks did not appear to be an issue. This topic could be addressed in a study that includes more parks established within natural reserves or nature areas.

Finally, in the way of general comments, we strongly encourage communities seriously considering establishing or modifying a dog park to retain a professional consultant knowledgeable in helping to prevent and resolve problems or concerns about off-leash parks.

Safety

Park managers and community officials ranked the safety of people and dogs as a primary concern in dealing with dog parks. However, our study, as well as those conducted elsewhere, reveal that injuries to people and dogs from dog bites at legal off-leash areas are rare. One possible reason for the low risk of a dog bite may be that park users almost always do not bring dogs that are likely to bite other dogs or people. However, overly assertive, overly unruly, and undersocialized dogs can negatively impact the behavior and welfare of other dogs visiting the park. To help ensure that this does not become an issue, the following suggestions should be implemented:

1. Overtly aggressive, overly assertive, overly unruly, and undersocialized dogs should be discouraged from visiting the parks. Park users should be educated in the signs that dogs display when performing these behaviors. While not aggressive to the point of fighting with other dogs, a dog that displays these types of behaviors can cause other dogs to become excessively fearful.
2. Park users should be discouraged from bringing young puppies or fearful dogs to parks, as they may be made more fearful by highly assertive dogs, highly interactive dogs, or rough play. A fearful dog may snap or bite as a way of defending itself, and perhaps develop problems that can be seen outside of the confines of a dog park.
3. The park users must have their dog under voice control.
4. Children should always be closely supervised by a responsible adult.
5. Owners should carry their leash on them at all times.
6. One activity for a dog park club is to help monitor interactions between dogs and other dogs and between dogs and people. The best option for an organization is to obtain indemnification from potential liability from their local government. If a local government has this sort of expectation from a dog park user group, then the governmental entity should be required to indemnify the group and absorb any legal liability (and legal costs) that might ensue.

Noise

This is another frequently mentioned concern of community officials. The noise level at parks invariably increased over baseline in the area of the highest concentration of activity during peak use. The degree that the surrounding community will notice this depends upon the degree to which the noise level potentially reflects an increase in ambient noise from such things as noise from increased automobile traffic. It should be kept in mind that sound level declines exponentially with distance from the source of the sound. Our research revealed no correlation approaching significance between the increase in noise level at dog parks during times of heavy use and ranking of park success. In park locations where noise from dogs may be an issue, we suggest the following:

1. Do not establish a dog park immediately adjacent to residential property lines.
2. If the dog park must be located immediately adjacent to residential property lines, create sound buffers with plants, fencing or earthen berms if needed.
3. If an established park shares a border with residential property lines, move the area of heaviest usage away from that boundary.

Sanitation

This is the third most highly profiled concern of community officials and park managers. However, our study found no significant correlation between fecal counts and success. The absence of a correlation may indicate a rather low occurrence of residual fecal droppings in parks. The median was 1 fecal dropping per 100 square meters (120 square yards). Clearly almost all users of dog parks are conscientious about picking up after their dogs. We did find a correlation between the number of signs reminding users to pick up after their dogs and a lower fecal count. The posting of signs highlighting the rule of picking up feces appeared to be more important than the number of refuse cans available – as long as the cans were accessible and not overflowing. To help assure compliance with community expectations of a clean park, we suggest the following:

1. Plan and budget for an appropriate maintenance and cleaning schedule, done by the municipality or organization managing the dog park.
2. Place signs stating the rules at the entrance(s) to the park, as well as within the park, profiling the rule that owners must pick up the feces of their dogs. Be sure that the signs are well maintained.
3. Provide adequate disposable bags, or other means of removing feces, and refuse cans for feces cleanup.
4. Suggest that an active dog park club help monitor the sanitation of the park.

Location

Our research indirectly points out the important role that the location of a park can have in its perceived success. In some instances, good use may be made of areas that are not in high demand for human-only use. As an extreme, one park was located underneath a freeway. In other instances, a location previously used by transients was upgraded as a community resource by the presence of off-leash dog use. The establishment of a well-maintained and responsibly-used dog park may actually improve the value of some neighborhoods. Another benefit for a well-located park, according to park managers, is that the availability of an off-leash park reduced the tendency for people to allow their dogs off-leash in areas where it is not legal.

Park size is important. We found a correlation between the size of the park and ranking of park success, with larger parks being ranked as more successful. Even for parks less than 3 acres, the larger the better. If everything else is equal, choose the larger of 2 possible locations. As observed by our study investigators, and verified by the manager interviews, it was not uncommon for users to allow their dogs off-leash when coming to or leaving a dog park, even though there were rules against allowing dogs off-leash away from the park. Locating a park close to convenient parking spaces for cars may reduce or eliminate this problem. The following are specific suggestions regarding location:

1. The size of the park should be as large as feasible. However, the municipality or organization managing the park needs to be able to adequately maintain the space.
2. Utilize alternate or nontraditional locations, if needed, to help decrease the chance for conflict with other community users.

1. Locate the park so that it is not directly adjacent to residential property lines, to help decrease the chance of actual and perceived problems between park users and the neighbors. However, the park should be close enough to a residential area that dog owners will take their dogs to the park and not allow them off-leash elsewhere.
2. Provide adequate parking for the dog park users, as most users (95%) drive to them. In addition, locate the off-leash area close to the parking lot as possible to discourage owners letting their dogs off-leash between the dog park and parking.
3. If applicable requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) must be taken into consideration.

Maintenance

If asked about the three things that influence how well an off-leash dog park works, one could answer maintenance, maintenance, and maintenance. This is a factor that proved to significantly correlate with ranking of park success, regardless of park size or whether dog-exclusive or multiple-use. The bottom line is that before establishing on an off-leash park, the community must plan ahead and commit resources for maintenance. The monetary costs and time for maintenance should be budgeted and taken into consideration prior to approval of the park. The factors that are part of maintenance include, but are not limited to, are: frequency of emptying refuse cans; re-supplying disposable plastic pick up bags; replacing or fixing broken, bent, or weathered signs displaying rules; filling holes dug by dogs; irrigation and maintenance of vegetation and turf; repairing fencing. Maintenance also includes cleaning restrooms and other park user amenities, such as benches. One perspective is that, as in reducing the occurrence of graffiti in urban areas by promptly removing graffiti, promptly removing fecal droppings encourages people to follow the rules about cleanliness. The following are our recommendations:

1. Plan and budget for appropriate maintenance and a cleaning schedule, which includes adequate sanitation procedures, filling of holes that are dug by dogs, proper maintenance of the substrate, and proper maintenance of fencing and amenities.
2. It is suggested that an active dog park club help advise the municipality as to the needed resources to maintain the park, and to help monitor their condition. However, do not rely on the club to handle the required maintenance.

Substrate

While the substrate within a park is undoubtedly important and correlates with park success, this is often the most difficult topic for which to make specific recommendations. All substrate types, whether turf, ground tree bark, decomposed granite, or heavily compacted base rock, may be appropriate for some parks or some areas in parks. It is important to choose an appropriate substrate for the location and resources available for adequate maintenance. Some thought must also be given for what is best for the dogs. The following are some guidelines:

- 1. Turf.** This is a favorable substrate if the location is appropriate and the municipality is able to undertake fairly intensive maintenance. If turf is planted, it must be adequately maintained to help prevent degeneration into dirt or mud, which includes irrigation, mowing, and weeding. Some parks are closed periodically for reseeding/resodding the grass. Feces may be hard to detect in turf, especially if it is long.

1. **Bark or wood chips.** This substrate is easily maintained. It needs to be replenished periodically, but does afford adequate drainage. Care should be taken when selecting a wood product so that dogs do not get splinters. Wood chips that are used for playgrounds are a good choice. Feces may be difficult to detect on the wood chips, but are easily removed. To some people wood chips are not very aesthetically pleasing.
2. **Decomposed granite.** As with wood chips this is relatively easily maintained. It needs to be replenished periodically. If deep enough and graded well, it allows adequate drainage. Feces are easily detected and removed from this substrate. Maintenance of holes dug by dogs needs to be addressed, because if there is not an adequate depth dogs may dig down to dirt, resulting in muddy holes.
3. **Sand.** This is the natural substrate in parks at the waterfront or on the beach. There is no worry about refilling holes dug by dogs, unless they are extremely large. It affords adequate drainage, and feces are easily detected and removed from this substrate. However, it is difficult for municipalities to maintain and keep clean, often requiring specialized equipment. Sand may become too hot for dogs' feet during warm weather.
4. **Heavily compacted base rock.** This may be the only option available, depending on the location. If used there are precautions to observe. First, pavement may get very hot if in direct sunlight. Secondly, users should be made aware that a dog might develop abrasions on the pads of their feet if they are not accustomed to spending a fair amount of time on this substrate. It is very low maintenance, and feces are easily detected and removed from this substrate. To help decrease odors, an enzyme-based disinfectant/deodorant can be sprayed on this substrate.
5. **Multiple different substrates used together.** Turf, bark, and concrete/asphalt trails may be used in different locations within a park. This offers dogs the opportunity to encounter and choose different types of footing. Trails encourage park users to walk with their dogs, therefore decreasing the density of dogs in one particular area. This also allows the human users the option to exercise themselves more easily.

Rules

We found that invariably all parks had rules. However, there was a wide disparity in how visible the rules were. The rules must be highly visible, so that everyone is well informed as to what is expected. We found a significant correlation between the number of signs posting fecal cleanup rules and the fecal count per 100 square meters (120 square yards). Short versions of the rules emphasizing clean-up should be posted in locations throughout the park, as well as at the entrance(s). This is an area where an active dog club may be very helpful by helping self-patrol the area. Park managers mentioned that “self-policing” and peer-pressure by park users helps the other users be more aware of the stated rules.

A charged issue about rules is placing a limit on the number of dogs allowed per user. The main concern is with regard to dogwalkers who may bring in as many as 15 dogs at a time. Our observations, reinforced by comments from users of the park, suggest that dogwalkers, and others with more than 3 dogs, are less conscientious about picking up fecal droppings or monitoring interactions with other dogs or people. In light of these observations it seems that limiting the number of off-leash dogs to 3 per adult user is not unreasonable. Here are our suggestions regarding rules:

1. Post rules in several visible locations; keep the signs well-maintained.
2. Rules should profile user responsibility, especially regarding clean-up.
3. Limit the number of dogs per adult allowed in the park. We suggest no more than 3 per adult user.
4. The park users must have their dog under voice control.
5. Do not allow dogs that are aggressive to other dogs or people into the park.
6. Unsupervised children under the age of 14 should not be allowed into the park for safety reasons.
7. Enforce leash laws in areas surrounding the dog park to decrease the number of dogs illegally off-leash going to and from the park.

Dog Park Clubs

The parks visited in our research had a range of dog park club involvement characterized as: none, currently inactive; moderately active with little financial or club newsletter involvement; quite active with a newsletter, and/or dues and meetings; and very active, involved with park management, self-policing by users and with dues, a newsletter and meetings. Clearly, an active dog park club is important to the success of a park and the more active the better. We suggest the following on this topic:

1. Suggest that an active dog park club participate in the planning of a dog park.
2. Suggest meetings of dog park club officials and the park management to review success and address any problems, or when serious problems arise.
3. Suggest that the dog park club sponsor an on-line and/or paper newsletter, and potentially an e-mail listserve, and charge reasonable dues.
4. Encourage the dog park club sponsor fundraiser with park users and periodically contribute proceeds to non-dog related functions, such as science and biology teaching in schools, to help increase harmony with the surrounding community.