

Socialization at the Dog Park

I just finished reading the holiday/winter issue of *The New Barker* and I couldn't miss the map on page 78 listing 38 dog parks in the Tampa Bay area. The number of dog parks is certainly a reflection of Tampa Bay's love affair with dogs.

Dog parks can be great places to socialize, meet people, let our dogs run and play off leash, but they are also places where we, as responsible dog owners, also need to be vigilant.

In an ideal world all dogs would always play nicely with each other and would always be responsive to their people. Every owner would watch their dogs and keep them out of trouble. In an ideal world all the dogs would be neutered or spayed and would be up to date on their vaccinations. Unfortunately reality is at odds with the ideal so it's up to us to keep Rover safe and teach him how to behave.

When Rover and I get to a dog park we spend some time walking outside of the fenced area watching the action and interactions inside. Are the people watching or even better interacting with their dogs or are they just letting their dogs run around with no supervision. If we see the latter, we probably won't go in the park. If we see a pack of dogs right near the entrance we definitely won't go in. If we see owners calling their dogs and the dogs ignoring them we might not go in. I'll explain why.

If people aren't watching their dogs then they are not prepared to intervene before things get out of hand. They also aren't likely to pick up after their dog because they won't even know if he's done his business. Speak with your veterinarian to make sure you understand the health risks of taking Rover to the dog park.

Dogs, especially regulars, at the park can form temporary packs that surround and sometime overwhelm a dog entering the park. These packs can have a mob mentality and do things as a pack that they wouldn't do individually. Most of the dog to dog aggression issues I've been asked to help with, and there have been a lot, were the result of dogs either being overwhelmed or attacked at dog parks. It can only take one bad incident to teach a dog that he needs to be wary of other dogs.

If dogs aren't responding to their people, they will be more likely to get into or cause trouble. They might become bullies or they might join a pack because they don't have leadership within their own family pack. Dogs seek out leaders, its instinctive and a hardwired part of their nature.

While we walk along the outside of the fence we practice heeling, sit/stays, and recall, all on a six foot leash. If Rover isn't able to pay attention to me, we won't go inside the park. Today things are going well. I haven't seen anything inside the park that gives me pause and Rover is responding to me on leash along the fence. We're going in.

We walk to the first gate, Rover has to sit and wait while I open the gate and walk in. I then release him and invite him in. I have him sit again and wait while I close the gate. Then I take his leash off and walk to the second (inside) gate. He again has to sit and wait until I go through the gate and invite him into the park. This reinforces gate and door manners so he won't push or rush through open doors.

Rover loves the park and gets excited which stimulates his need to toilet. First stop is the bag dispenser. Then I give Rover the "Go Poop" command. Once his waste is picked up and tossed in the trash container it's time to make Rover really earn his play time.

We go to the middle of the park, now with him walking to heel off leash. He has to sit and stay again, off leash, with dogs running around, some even trying to entice him to play. When he does well, I'll look for someone whose dog is chasing a ball or is playing some other running game. I

ask if they or their dog would mind if Rover plays chase. I'll explain that he isn't interested in the ball, but just likes to run after or in front of dogs. Usually we get an ok. Game on!

This is a good time to mention that dogs are individuals and so enjoy different types of play. Some dogs love to wrestle, some like trying to bowl over other dogs by running into them, some love playing fetch or tug games and some love running and playing chase games.

Rover's favorites are the running and chasing games. It's important to know your dog's preferred play and try to find other dogs engaged in like play. It's not much fun get jumped on if you don't like wrestling or to get bumped into if you don't like that sort of thing. Dogs will let each other know if they want to play or if they are having fun by their body language and vocalizations. It's up to us to monitor our dogs and make sure their play doesn't get out of hand.

I give Rover the "Go Play" release and off he goes the next time the ball is thrown. He runs full speed after the dog and often gets to the ball before the other dog, but he doesn't try to pick it up. He'll then chase or lead the other dog back. I watch to make sure that the other dog really doesn't get too upset that Rover is chasing him. There is often a little growling and snapping especially near the ball, but that usually ends as soon as the dog realizes that Rover isn't trying to get the ball.

Usually when they get back to the starting point they actually do the sniff greeting to say hello. Rover will also try to get everyone nearby to pet him. He's often more interested in meeting people than he is in meeting dogs. I monitor him to make sure he doesn't make a pest of himself.

I let him play chase a few times then it's time to make him work again. As he starts chasing, I stop him with a verbal command and make him come back to me and sit. We start this exercise, called distance control, when he's very close and work on expanding my sphere of influence. I can usually work up stopping him when he's in a full run about thirty feet away. He responded well so he gets another "Go Play" release.

We practice all his commands off leash in the park. Each time he does what I instruct he earns play time. If he doesn't we'll head off to a quiet part of the park and practice where there are less distractions. If he's too unfocused or distracted we'll leave the park, but it's very rare that happens.

After a few sprints he'll want to head to the water. I know that he can hog the water and if there is a mud puddle he'll want to lay down in it. He will find any puddle in the park and claim it as his own if I let him. I walk him over to the water area and if there are no other dogs there I let him enjoy the puddle. If other dogs come over I make Rover get up and move away so they can have access the water.

Once he's refreshed we walk around the park with Rover having to stay nearby as I lead the way. I sometime make him stay right in the heel position but often we just play follow the leader on a twisty zig-zag free form course. If Rover gets ahead of me I turn and go a different direction and encourage him to follow. We mix in sits, downs, stays and recalls along the way.

I didn't start working with Rover in the park until he was rock solid at home. I built the foundation where he spends the majority of his time. I set him up to succeed by knowing the signals that he was ready to progress. We didn't go inside the park the first few times we went there. We worked on leash, including a twenty foot leash, outside the park until he was responsive within sight of all the activity inside. We slowly worked our way closer and closer to the fence until we could work right along the fence with Rover remaining attentive even when the dogs inside came up to the fence where we were working. It was only after he could pay attention there that we started working inside.

What does all of this have to do with socialization? Socialization by definition is training for social situations. Dogs learn by association, but they are not as adapt at generalizing what they learn as people are. In order for Rover to follow instructions everywhere, we need to practice them everywhere. He won't know how to behave in different situations unless I teach him. It's an on going process which needs care and attention everywhere we go. There are few places with more distractions or more social than the dog park so it's a great place to work on all his skills.

Know your dog, keep him safe, out of trouble, have fun and make him work. Combine physical and mental exercise to really give Rover a work out. He'll come home tired and happy. Having a dog includes the responsibility to teach him how to behave everywhere he goes, even at the park. A well behaved dog is a happy dog and a happy dog makes for a happy family.

© Jeff Drier 2004 - 2009