

Substrate

This is the most difficult topic for which to make specific recommendations. All substrate types, including man-made materials, 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. 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.
2. Bark or wood chips. This substrate is relatively easily maintained. It needs to be replenished periodically, but does allow adequate drainage. Care should be taken when selecting a wood product, such as playground woodchips, so that dogs do not get splinters. Feces may be difficult to detect on the wood chips, but are easily removed.
3. Decomposed granite. This substrate 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. Maintenance of holes dug by dogs needs to be addressed.
4. 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 allows adequate drainage, and feces are easily detected and removed from this substrate. However, it is difficult for municipalities to maintain, often requiring specialized equipment. Sand may become too hot for dogs' feet during warm weather.
5. Compacted base rock/asphalt. In some locations this may be the only option available, based on the location. Pavement may get very hot if in direct sunlight. Users should be made aware that dogs may 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 can be sprayed on this substrate.
6. Multiple substrates together. This offers dogs opportunity to 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.

DOG PARKS

Help Make Them Successful

Community support and involvement is important, especially in promoting a harmonious relationship with the neighbors of the park. Developing realistic guidelines for all to follow is the first step in this process.

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. Maintenance, along with the proper selection of a location, is essential in the continued success of a park. Our research 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 concerns primarily related to safety of humans and other dogs, noise, 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, 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.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL MANAGEMENT OF OFF-LEASH DOG EXERCISE AREAS

CENTER FOR ANIMALS IN SOCIETY
SCHOOL OF VETERINARY MEDICINE
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-DAVIS

The recommendations put forth in these guidelines are based in part on the study of 17 off-leash dog parks in California.



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Overview of Guidelines

There are many values of having a dog park available for people and their dogs to use. Owners of dogs socialize with one another and can exercise with their dogs, as well as practicing and promoting responsible pet ownership. In well-managed dog parks, the ability for dogs to adequately exercise and socialize also can help to promote better behaved dogs.

Our findings revealed that, in the parks that we evaluated, there were very few problems associated with safety of people or dogs, noise, or odor from dog waste. Injury to people or other dogs was never observed during the visits, and was reported by park managers to be of low incidence. Noise levels or fecal density did not correlate with our measure of park success. It should be noted that maintenance and park size were significantly correlated with success.

Safety

To help ensure that safety does not become an issue, the following suggestions should be implemented:

1. Owners of overtly aggressive, assertive, unruly, or 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. Park users should help monitor interactions between dogs and other dogs and between dogs and people. The best option is for a dog park club 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

In park locations where noise from dogs may be an issue, we suggest the following:

1. 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

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 regularly by the municipality or organization managing the dog park.
2. Place signs listing 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

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 nontraditional locations that are not especially suitable for other purposes, if needed, to help decrease the chance for conflict with other community users.
3. While the park should not be directly adjacent to residential property lines, it 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.
4. Provide adequate parking for the dog park users, as most users drive to them. 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.
5. If applicable, requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act must be taken into consideration.

Maintenance

Maintenance appeared to be highly correlated to the successfulness of dog parks.

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.

Rules

Here are our suggestions regarding some 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 a limit of 3 per adult visitor.
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

An active dog park club can be 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.