

Does Size Really Matter – At The Dog Park?

By Alison Deeb

As a dog park advocate, I am often asked if size really matters at the dog park and whether or not pint-size canines and their larger canine cousins can be friends. Here is an experience I had that may help to illustrate why one or more separate enclosures are necessary when building a dog park for your community.

In 2004, two Mardog members were coming over for a committee meeting at my home. Camille is a founding member but cannot use the dog park with her dog. She volunteers her time because she believes in the necessity for public dog parks and their benefit to both the animals and people. Camille's dog Callie is a mixed breed with a strong prey drive. A true mutt, Callie is primarily part Doberman and Shepherd but we don't really know her predominant breed or how she will behave at times of stress or uncertainty.

Jane has a Schnauzer mix who excites easily and barks incessantly every time she sees another dog or person. Sally the Schnauzer is very cute and is a true terrier. She always has a lot to say and is extremely active and perky. But she settles quickly.

When Sally arrived and came through the front door, Callie immediately charged through the back door into the dining room. Within seconds, a fight ensued right underneath my dining room table. Sally had puncture wounds and the incident happened within seconds. What happened? Apparently, Callie smelled food as Sally entered, and her instinctive prey drive took over.

According to toy breed expert Darlene Arden, there are always going to be big dog and little dog issues. Little dogs can intrude on big dogs and big dogs will prey on little dogs. Small dog owners have as much of a responsibility as large dog owners and you need to be prudent when visiting a dog park that doesn't have a separate area for small/timid dogs. "If you go to the park with your 8 pound Maltese, and all you see are large breeds in the park that day, I would be very careful about entering the dog park. Turn around and go away and come back another day. Small dogs need to establish that they exist so they will always precipitate something," says Arden. "This attitude can get them killed."

With the varied dynamics of an off-leash dog public dog park, including breed, age, personality, size, sex, it is best to have a separate enclosure for small and big dogs. It can rule out one last measure of spuriousness and make the park more safe and enjoyable for everyone, canine and non-canine.

There are other, non-behavior related reasons for have separate areas for large and small dogs. Small dogs, who may not be seen in a larger animal's blind spot, are in danger of being sideswiped or even crushed. Toy breeds, such as Yorkies and Chihuahuas, could get stepped on if they are not noticed by large dogs or even people. Having a small dog area helps to insure safety.

What to do if there is only one enclosure at your dog park? According to Arden's "10 Tips For Small Dogs 20 lbs and Under," "Absolutely no way should you pick up your small dog in the run." By picking up your dog, you elevate your dog's status. Another

Does Size Really Matter – At The Dog Park?

By Alison Deeb

dog may come after your dog and then bite you by accident. “They are still dogs, no matter what size,” says Arden.

Here are some other tips for small dog owners who frequent a single-enclosure dog park:

- *Supervision* – Always supervise your small dog at the dog park. Little dogs can be injured by bigger dogs who are running loose.
- *Awareness* - Be aware of park boundaries. Small dogs can get sideswiped or crushed by a bigger dog’s blind spot.
- *Children* – Children under 12 are not recommended at the dog park and small dogs and small children are not a good mix. Toy breeds can be accidentally injured or killed by small children. Never let a child pick up a small dog.
- *Good manners*. Take an AKC Good Citizen class and teach your small dog good manners. Some of the most useful commands at the dog park are Sit, Stay and Come.
- *Observation*. If you see a bunch of larger breeds playing, it might be better to come back another time with your small dog.

While it is amusing to watch a Boston Terrier haunt a harlequin Great Dane or a Jack Russell Terrier boss and bring a 100 pound Labrador to her back, it is better to be safe than sorry. Building a separate enclosure for small and or shy/timid dogs so they too can have there hey day at the park is the way to get off on the right paw!.

“The best practice we have seen is actually three enclosures: a large dog area, a small / timid dog area and a time out/one dog area,” says Denville ACO Meredith Petrillo. A time out area ensures that dogs with known dog-dog aggressive issues have a place to play. According to Petrillo, “Just because a dog is aggressive and doesn’t like other dogs, doesn’t mean he can’t get the exercise he or she needs. In fact, routine visits to the dog park can reduce the instances of aggression and make the dog a better canine citizen.”

With New Jersey being the most densely populated space in the country, we are increasingly competing for open space. I live in a town home development and there is no fenced-in backyard to “let the dog out.” Space is at a premium. While we are privileged to have a dog park at all, it would be safer to have a separate area for small / timid dogs.

Fictitious names have been used to protect privacy.

Alison Deeb is the President and Founder of the Morris Area Responsible Dog Owners’ Group (Mardog) a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that focuses on dog park development in Morris County, New Jersey. For chapter or sponsor opportunities, Alison can be reached at (973) 290-9338 or visit the online dog park community web site at www.mardog.org.