

Two weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending the opening of Vallejo's new dog park on Ascot Parkway. The weather was perfect and the turnout was impressive with dogs, dog owners, and local dignitaries in abundance. With the exception of a couple of unfortunate incidences, all the dogs got along surprisingly well. Overall it was a fun event and everyone seemed happy and proud to have such a nice park for their canine family members.

The concept of an enclosure where dogs can run and play off-leash is a fine idea, but I'd be lying if I told you I didn't worry a bit about the potential for ah...well...lets just call it "inter-canine conflict". In my line of work one sees this one possible down side of unfamiliar dogs running loose together.

Dogs, like people, develop social skills early in life. Veterinarians that study dog behavior tell us that in dogs the most critical period for developing social skills is from 4 weeks to 14 weeks of age. During this time a dog learns to accept/tolerate/trust other animals (humans included) in their lives. This is not to say that socialization cannot occur at other stages in life, but the 4-14 week window seems to present the best opportunity. This can be a little tricky. As many of you know, this age window is also when a pup is most vulnerable to infectious disease and taking a pup to lots of places, where other possibly sick dogs are, may be risky. I encourage families get around this issue by introducing their puppy to other gentle, healthy, well vaccinated dogs in a supervised and well controlled environment such as their yard or home. This exposure should not be limited just to dogs but also to people of various ages and genders.

Adult dogs that seem to have "missed class" during their 4-14 week window and exhibit some socialization issues can often be helped with repeated, very brief, non-threatening exposures to other dogs and people-always keeping the experience below the fear/anxiety threshold. It's important to always keep these experiences positive (food treats are good) and avoid, at all costs, forcing the pet into an uncomfortable social environment. With time and a lot of patience even the shy under-socialized adult dog can become more comfortable with other dogs and people; though we recognize he/she may always remain somewhat fearful/aggressive/anxious when around strangers. Your veterinarian can be more specific in guiding you in your efforts, or refer you to a veterinary behavior specialist.

The dog park opening brought to mind another issue that long been a concern of mine. Like most cities, Vallejo has a leash law, and if you are not within the safe confines of the dog park your dog should be securely restrained and under your complete control. As summer approaches with its warm long days we naturally want to be outside more with our dogs. Each year we see several cases of dog-on-dog aggression with sometimes tragic consequences. In some cases these events occur because an irresponsible dog owner allows their dog to "roam" the neighborhood. This is bad idea, a really bad idea. In an unfamiliar situation this loose dog may become unpredictably aggressive toward other animals or people-especially children. He may wander into a busy street and cause a traffic accident, possibly injuring people and/or become injured himself. In other cases, a dog may rush out of an open front door or through an unsecured gate to attack innocent people and dogs walking past the house. Sadly, most all of these scary and potentially tragic attacks are preventable.

Dog owners in Vallejo owe it to each other to be responsible in exercising, and housing their dogs. By making common sense decisions about how we raise, secure, and

care for our dogs, we can all safely enjoy the warm summer months with our four-legged friends safely in tow.

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