

Why is the toilet the smallest room in our house? How does this question affect the success or not of off-leash dog parks?

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Abstract

Off Leash Dog Parks (OLAS) vary greatly around Australia in their location, size and the amenities provided, depending on where councils can find space to locate them. Parks personnel, who often know little about dog behaviour, design most of these parks. Most councils then sign post them with the two most obvious local laws required, ie. Picking up dog poo and being in control of your dog. Other than that, dog owners basically have to fend for themselves.

The success or failure, of these areas as sociable, exercise areas will be determined by many different factors. Councils determine some of these when designing the parks, and other factors are determined by the responsibility or lack thereof, of the dog owners using the parks.

The aim of this paper is to examine four crucial factors for success or failure of these OLAS from the perspective of councils, dogs and their owners. They are:

- Design and size of the parks
- Laws required to keep dogs under control
- Dogs not suitable for OLAS
- Children in OLAS

It will also examine how councils can improve the use of these parks without the need for costly and time-consuming regulations that are almost impossible to enforce.

Introduction

The establishment of OLAS was initially driven by community demand for areas to exercise dogs off leash. It is recognised, when dogs have a routine and are exercised daily they are less likely to be a problem for owners, neighbours and local government. It is also recognised that dogs well socialised at an early age, generally present less risk of developing aggressive behaviours towards both people and other dogs. Therefore, OLAS responsibly used, can provide a setting for both exercise and socialisation to take place in a very positive manner. Indeed, in cities around the country many thousands of dogs and their owners use these facilities on a daily basis with positive outcomes.

However, when providing these facilities councils cannot automatically guarantee the magical outcome will be well behaved, non-aggressive and socialised dogs. Even though major incidents like serious dog attacks will sometimes be reported to council, does this necessarily mean that when we hear nothing, all is going well? It is a very interesting exercise to read 'Letters to the Editor' in dog magazines and visit some of the dog park etiquette 'blogg' sites on the Internet. The arguments about what constitutes controlled or uncontrolled behaviour are not only ongoing but in some cases, particularly nasty and personal.

Factors of location, size and amenities

Demand by ratepayers is a powerful motivator for councils to provide the amenities asked for, however this can be extremely difficult to accomplish satisfactorily, especially in the older, already established suburbs of our cities. Spare land suitable for use as an off leash area is not easy to find, so councils are faced by a number of difficult questions, such as:

- How big do we make it and how much is it going to cost?
- Do we allocate a portion of an already established park, which may have other uses, eg. Children's playgrounds, cycle paths, walking tracks, barbeques, beach areas?
- Or do we look for "waste" ground such as beside a creek or drainage ditch, which has no other purpose beyond being a flood area in times of heavy rain?
- How will the location of the OLA affect other users of the park?
- Do we fence it or leave it unfenced?
- What other amenities are required, i.e. poo bags and bins, water points, agility equipment, shade, seats, tables?
- What is the cheapest and most effective way of sign posting the area?
- What regulations are required to govern their use?

By examining some of the advantages (□) and disadvantages (X) of fenced or unfenced OLAS, we may be able to answer some of these questions.

Fenced areas

- √ Are more easily identified and the boundaries are clear.
- √ Dogs are safely enclosed and unable to run away, get onto roads, chase cars, bikes, pedestrians or children, especially if the park is double-gated for safety.
- √ Specifically fenced OLAS have one purpose only, to exercise off leash dogs. They are not shared areas with multiple purposes.
- X They are expensive for councils to build, depending on the size of the area and the quality of the fencing materials used.
- X A fenced area, particularly when small to save on costs, can become a territorial area to protect, especially for dogs that frequent them on a daily basis. This escalates the possibility of fights occurring.
- X A small fenced area does not encourage people to walk with their dogs, but rather to stand around socialising. This increases the risk of inadequate supervision of dog behaviour.
- X More importantly though, **very** small areas become nothing more than a fenced toilet area. Like humans, dogs do not socialise and play in a toilet area, even though unlike humans, they do like to check out what other dogs have left behind! Even the best of friends will not spend time playing there. In larger dog parks, it is more usual to find that dogs will go to the extreme edges of the park along the fence line to do their business, leaving the middle ground clean for their socialising.
- X Dog owners who can't recall their dogs can avoid responsibility and control issues with their dog because they are safely enclosed.

Unfenced areas

- √ No expensive fencing required.
- √ Larger areas can be designated as off leash which helps avoid the territorial issues.
- √ Owners need to be really responsible and have more control over their unleashed dogs.
- X It can sometimes be difficult to locate the actual OLA, especially within a larger park area. The sign posting may be small and out of the way.
- X It can be difficult to determine where the boundaries of the park start and finish and dogs can't read. A frightened dog that runs away, or one that is chasing a ball is not going to stop as soon as it arrives at the signpost or the imaginary line that designates the boundary.
- X With multi-purpose unfenced parks, the risk of accidents, Public Liability issues, and damage to bike riders, children and other people is much higher.

In both cases, the three major pros and cons for both fenced and unfenced areas basically come down to issues of expense, the responsibility required by dog owners and safety issues, and councils will have to make their decisions to fence or not, based on those three issues.

However, there is another important issue that should be taken into account when designing the parks. As public amenities, these parks are not just open spaces for dogs. They are an important place for people to meet, exercise and socialise too. Therefore like other public amenities, they require some aesthetic appeal, seating, adequate shade from summer heat and shelter from rain.

Most dog parks have regular groups of people frequenting them on a daily basis. These people form social groups both in and beyond the park boundaries. When people **value** the space and the amenities provided, they will assume more responsibility for looking after the area. It is not unusual at my own dog park to see groups of people assuming responsibility for picking up someone else's poo, providing extra poo bags, picking up other rubbish, spraying for weeds and prickles, removing graffiti from benches and tables, as well as negotiating with council for improvements or repairs to broken equipment or fencing.

Park rules

The other major decision faced by councils is about which laws are required to govern the use of these parks. There is an assumption that the more rules and regulations you have, the less likely people will be to read them and the more difficult it will be to enforce. Therefore, councils have kept it simple by reducing the rules and sign posting the two most obvious ones required, ie. picking up poo and keeping your dog under control.

The first rule of 'picking up poo' is so specific that most people do follow it, and when they don't, **peer pressure** from others in the park is usually enough to make them comply. However 'keeping your dog under control', although very **specific under the law**, is not sign posted as such and therefore dog owners are reduced to interpreting and putting their own values' judgement on what 'control' means. This can be the cause of major altercations between people and a lack of responsibility in controlling dog behaviour.

It is common to see overly excited, dominant and aggressive dogs harassing or scaring others with constant stalking, mounting, aggressive attacks and body 'slamming' behaviours. When the owner of the dog is approached and asked to control their dog, common responses can include:

- "But he's only playing!" (Like the bully in the school yard who says, "But I was only teasing!")
- "It's an off leash dog park! What do you expect?"
- "It doesn't say that on the sign post." (In reference to a particular behaviour)

Because the sign posted law is not specific enough, it is difficult for peer pressure to work as effectively as it does in the 'picking up poo' case. The obvious solution is for concerned dog owners to ring the council and make a complaint, but there are several reasons why most won't bother to do so:

- They usually don't know the name and address of the person involved so it becomes difficult for council officers to follow up.
- They can't guarantee that the person and their dog will be at the park on a specific day and at a specific time, and would therefore waste the council officer's valuable time in unproductive visits over several days or weeks.
- There's no guarantee that an officer will be contactable and available when the person is at the park.
- Most parks are used out of normal office hours, therefore a minimum number of officers are on duty at that time and their caseload may have higher priorities.

Over nine years of daily walks in dog parks in three different states, I've never seen a Council Officer in any of the parks educating people, or enforcing the two rules which are sign posted. This is not a criticism of councils or their officers, as there simply aren't enough to do the job and OLAS would be low on their list of priorities. However, it is recognition of the fact that all rules and laws in society rely in large part on the good will and the social conscience of the community. In other words, rules give people guidelines on how to behave with the knowledge that if they break the law, then they may be caught and face the consequences.

Most people who use dog parks don't deliberately set out to break the rules or to be irresponsible. They are more often than not, just ignorant of the complex repertoire of a dog's body language and reasons for its behaviour. Therefore it would make more sense to specifically state the uncontrolled behaviours that are unacceptable so they are clearly sign posted. Ignorance cannot be used then as an excuse. Even if irresponsible people choose not to read the entire sign, it would allow councils' greatest asset, of **peer pressure from others**, to work more effectively. It would give responsible people a specific reference point to enhance and back up their request for more controlled behaviour and take away the need to interpret what controlled behaviour means.

The rules could still be simply stated as:

Owners are responsible for:

- Picking up their dog's poo
- Keeping their dog under control. Uncontrolled behaviour includes:

- Harassing, intimidating, attacking, stalking, mounting and body slamming other dogs. A dog running from others with its tail between its legs is not having fun or playing. It is frightened!

There is one further rule that I believe councils should seriously consider including on the list, and that is the exclusion of un-neutered dogs from OLAS. After nine years of observation, I can safely say, that most attacks or fights, I've seen have been generated by one or both dogs having been un-neutered. It only takes the arrival of one un-neutered dog to disrupt the pattern of play in progress and escalate the possibility of a dog attack. Most un-neutered dogs do not play and socialise with the other dogs.

They are too busy staking territory and trying to assert their influence. They are also the ones most likely to exhibit the dominant, aggressive, mounting and stalking behaviours, which are the causes of intimidation, harassment and fights. The hormonal scent of un-neutered females, even when not on heat, can also incite all the other dogs into chasing, harassing and trying to mount them until the females start to protect themselves by snapping, biting or fighting.

It's true that the dominant or aggressive behaviours exhibited by many un-neutered dogs should automatically be covered by the rule of owners keeping their dogs under control. However, the 'hair trigger speed' with which a dog attack can erupt is beyond the control of most dog owners using these parks. Most of these dogs are family pets and not highly trained in obedience, and most owners do not have the required knowledge about dog behaviour to be able to predict an attack or fight happening. It is too late to say the attacking dog should have been under control, after a dog or puppy has been badly injured or killed. Dogs do die in these parks! I have heard of five dogs being killed by aggressive animals in a matter of seconds, and numerous others having serious injuries.

Currently, councils don't ban un-neutered dogs from OLAS, because they don't want to discriminate against owners wishing to keep their dogs entire. Despite all the advertising by councils, vets and animal welfare groups about the benefits of neutered dogs, many people still decide not to neuter their animals, and this choice is currently still their right. However, rights don't automatically come without responsibilities and in life, there are always consequences for the choices we make. Perhaps one of the consequences people should face if choosing not to neuter their dog is that it must be walked on leash in places other than OLAS.

Dogs not suitable for OLAS

There are four types of dogs not suited to the unstructured and unleashed conditions of OLAS. They are:

- **Aggressive dogs** - For obvious reasons, it is neither appropriate nor lawful to bring an aggressive dog into an OLA.
- **Un-neutered dogs** - As already discussed in the previous point.
- **Fearful and nervous dogs** - Fearful dogs become even more fearful when confronted by stressful situations, and OLAS are stressful for them. These dogs are perfect examples of the old adage, "Attack is the best method of defence." They will often lunge, display teeth, growl and bark at the approach of other dogs, with the message being, "Don't come any closer. I can look after myself." If challenged back they will often turn and run. However, if feeling really threatened they will attack just as an aggressive dog will.
- **Puppies** - Many owners think that an OLA is the perfect place to socialise their new puppies, without realising that OLAS are not controlled or structured enough for puppies to be safe. Their small bodies and soft bones are at great risk of injury from the overzealous and boisterous play of bigger dogs. Owners will also often bring very young puppies before their vaccination regime has been completed and therefore put the dog at risk of disease.

Children and dogs

Uncontrolled and unsupervised children are also a major concern for most dog owners in parks. It amazes me how often parents of small children can be so unaware of the dangers when mixing unpredictable children and off leash dogs together!

A few months ago, I was horrified when visiting my local OLA, to discover a birthday party being conducted there. About fifteen children all under the age of five were running around, clambering over the agility equipment, yelling, screaming and laughing in high-pitched voices. Every one of them had food in their hands and a multitude of dogs following them trying to get the food! Some parents were supervising, but most were standing around socialising, totally unaware of the apparent dangers. Many other dog owners left soon after arriving when they realised how chaotic the scene was. Fortunately, nothing dire happened other than a couple of children losing their birthday cake to the dogs, and the food on the table being raided by a Beagle! However, that was entirely down to the responsibility shown by other dog owners keeping their dogs under control, away from the party area, or leaving the park altogether!

Imagine though for a moment if this scenario had occurred -

"A small child runs with food in her hand. Two dogs chase trying to get the food. The child stops and holds the food high to protect it. The dogs jump believing the food is being held up for them. The child starts screaming when one dog jumps and scratches her face with its claws. Her screaming attracts the attention of other nearby dogs. She then drops the food and a scrap develops amongst what is now a small pack of dogs trying to get the food. In the melee the child is bitten on the leg."

Although a dramatic scenario in the context of this particular party, it is not an impossible one. So who would really be responsible? Sure the dogs could be under more control, but where are the parents of the child? Why is this child allowed to run around with food when amongst dogs? Why is a children's party taking place in a dog park in the first place?

Other very common but frightening scenarios seen with dogs and children include:

- Young toddlers approaching dogs lying down and putting their faces right in front of the dog's face to get its attention!
- Small children clambering all over the agility equipment being knocked over by dogs which are running the course.
- Children trying to pat two or more dogs that are playing together.
- Children picking up dog toys and playing tug of war with the dogs.
- Primary school aged children bringing their dog to the park unaccompanied by an adult.
- Children approaching an unknown dog, with their hands over its head trying to pat it, whilst staring straight into its face.
- Children on bikes being chased by dogs.

All of the above scenarios can be recipes for disaster and they occur on a daily basis. Most responsible dog owners would never contemplate taking their dog anywhere near a children's playground. I wonder why parents think the reverse is any safer? Responsible dog owners would be devastated if their dog bit someone else's child. However, they would also be extremely angry and appalled if their dog had to pay the ultimate price of losing its life because an irresponsible parent hadn't supervised their child's dangerous or precocious behaviour, which provoked the dog to bite in the first place.

Solutions

Design of parks, reviewed and clearly stated rules and education are the key factors to improving the safety of these parks. Initially they need to come from councils.

1. Design

Collaboration needs to occur between parks personnel who are responsible for setting up the parks, and animal management personnel who know something about dog behaviour, before money is spent on creating small, unattractive OLAS that will become nothing more than toilet areas that the community doesn't value. It would be more advantageous and financially sound to have fewer parks in a city, if they were larger, more attractive and better sited than dozens of small ones that are rarely used: in other words **quality rather than quantity**.

Dog owners don't mind travelling to interesting parks, especially when they provide better facilities, such as:

- The opportunity to walk rather than standing around.
- Plenty of shade and an aesthetic outlook.
- Seats and shelter from the weather.

Collaboration between councils and dog park users is also useful in determining what other equipment could be provided to enhance the area once it has been set up. Such collaboration at the park I frequent has helped the community to gain:

- a small dog enclosure,
- extra seating and shelters,
- extra poo bins and watering points. and
- agility equipment.

Several parks in Brisbane now have small dog and puppy enclosures attached to the main OLA. These provide a safe area for small dogs and an interim area for puppies. Puppies have time to grow and socialise safely, while owners have time to learn more about OLAS before entering the larger area when their dog is older.

This collaboration between councils and park users plays an important part in encouraging the community to take pride in the park and to value it, which in turn encourages the community to take care of the park and its equipment.

2. Review and clearly state the rules

It is important to keep the rules simple but well defined so that park users are not reduced to interpreting them according to their own values. Review all the rules and consider adding a ban on un-neutered dogs to the list.

3. Education

Since the introduction of OLAS in the 1990s, there has been very little information available about the safe use of these parks. There are plenty of books available on the subject of dog training but very little on OLAS. My book *"Meet and Greet: An Etiquette Guide for Off Leash Dog Park Behaviour"* is only one of two published in Australia about Australian OLAS.

Having provided the facilities, councils therefore have a responsibility to educate people in their safe use. This could occur in a number of ways:

- Give out advice pamphlets or booklets when the dog is registered, or post them out to all dog owners.
- Develop an advice sign, separate to that which states the council laws, to hang on the gate. (See attachment) Use a dot point format to keep it simple.
 - Gate signs are longer lasting than pamphlets.
 - There is direct contact with dog owners using the park.
 - Peer pressure then works to assist councils. Social groups self enforce rules and then discuss and spread information to others.
 - Include very specific advice for parents on the supervision of their children.
- Post information and advice on Council Websites.

- Follow up complaints about attacks or uncontrolled dogs from a particular park, with visits by a council officer over a period of time. This should involve, not only investigating the particular complaint, but also using the visits in a proactive sense to observe general behaviour, gather information, speak to people and spend time educating and distributing advice.
- Organise fun days in the park, such as the K9 Capers Program run by Brisbane City Council, which provides a positive vehicle for information to go directly to dog owners in OLAS. This helps improve relations between the community and council and also allows Local Laws Officers to be seen as more than just the 'The Dog Catchers' or enforcers handing out fines.

Conclusion

OLAS are valuable community facilities. They provide exercise areas for dogs, but also a place where people with a common interest can meet, build relationships and share information. Unfortunately, unsafe behaviours by some dogs and their owners can spoil the enjoyment for the majority and place others at risk of serious damage. Ignorance rather than irresponsibility is the main cause. Education and thoughtful design of the parks would go a long way towards improving the safety of these areas.

About the Author

Gwen Mc Arthur was a teacher for 30 years in the Northern Territory. She taught in both urban and isolated communities. For the last 12 years of her career she worked in the specialist field of Behaviour Management, advising teachers and parents on how to manage unruly student behaviour.

She undertook a Dog Obedience Trainer's course and exam in Darwin, before a move to Queensland in 2001 brought an opportunity to change career directions. Her love of animals, but particularly dogs encouraged her to learn more about canine behaviour and obedience training. The years of observing student behaviour then translated into observations of unruly dogs and their owners at off leash dog parks. Since 2003, Gwen has developed a consultancy business registered as K9 Capers to assist and advise Councils on all aspects of off leash parks. This has meant visiting hundreds of off leash areas, talking to thousands of dog owners and observing many hundreds of dogs and their behaviour. She has developed a kit on K9 Capers activities that Councils can use to provide educational and fun events for the public and their dogs. She is also the author of "Meet and Greet: An Etiquette Guide for Off Leash Dog Park Behaviour." This comprehensive handbook of advice for Councils and dog owners not only covers the protocols for using off leash areas, but also examines all aspects of responsible dog ownership.

Attachment 1

Etiquette for Off-Leash Dog Parks

**Keep dog parks a safe and fun place
to exercise our dogs.**

- Obedience train and socialise your dog before bringing it to an off leash dog park.
- Learn all you can about dog behaviour and body language.
- Actively supervise and control your dog's behaviour.
- Ensure you are able to recall your dog and place it back on its leash if it becomes too excitable or boisterous.
- Restrain your dog if it annoys, intimidates or becomes aggressive with other dogs.
- Make sure your dog does not frighten or harass other dogs.
- Always carry a poo bag and clean up after your dog.
- Stop your dog from crowding the gate when newcomers arrive.
- Be aware of small, timid dogs.
- If your dog causes damage to another dog, offer to pay all or a portion of the vet's bill.
- Make sure you CLOSE the gate properly when you enter or leave.

If you bring children into an off leash park, ensure that you supervise them at all times:

- Do not allow your child to pat unknown dogs.
- Do not allow children to run and scream.
- Do not allow children to approach two or more dogs playing together.
- Do not allow children to bring food, toys or bikes to the dog park.
- Do not allow children to put their faces close to a dog's face.