

Expert tips for an enjoyable *dog park* experience

BY PAUL SINKEWICZ

Christina Chandler would like to get two things straight: not all dogs are cut out for the off-leash dog park (and that's okay) and all dogs can benefit from training, no matter their age.

The owner of Align Canine Training estimates she has dealt with more than 7,000 dogs over her 17 years as a professional dog trainer.

She has some tips for dog owners who want to ensure they have an enjoyable time at the off-leash dog park, and some of them are surprising. Aside from the common sense etiquette of always picking up after your dog and bringing a leash along on the walk, here are some takeaways from somebody who knows dogs:

MANAGE YOUR DOG'S EXCITEMENT LEVEL

A set daily routine can be a great tool, but in some dogs, it could be the cause of some of your grief. You come home from work, grab a snack and then suit up for the daily walk.

Guess what? Your dog can become highly attuned to your routine, and in their way, know exactly what time it is. Chandler says mixing up the routine a little can ease the anticipation.

Another helpful tip is to engage with your dog both mentally and physically at home. Tire your dog out before going to the park. Don't save up your dog's energy for the big outing. It can cause big problems, she says.

"I know that this is really contradictory to what a lot of people think, but it's actually way better to tire your dog out before you go," Chandler said. "Not necessarily physically. Mentally tiring your dog out right before you go to the dog park is going to help them be able to deal with the high stimulation of the park in a more appropriate way so that they're not going to be too over stimulated the second they show up."

A few minutes of refresher training, a short leash walk that involves some focus work, scent detection or other brain games — it all helps.

GET TO KNOW YOUR DOG

Whether you are a new dog owner, or an old hand, whether you have a puppy or have adopted a rescue dog, keep learning. Learn about general dog behaviour by reading up on your dog's breed, take a class or two from a professional, and above all, be observant.

Chandler says it's her goal to help owners and dogs really enjoy each other, and part of that is gaining familiarity with a dog's needs and individual personality.

"Body language for the most part is fairly universal, and if we can make sure that we're paying attention to those things and we've learned how to read those things that's going to be a really key component to whether or not a dog park experience is a good one."

Chandler says it's important to pay attention to how your dog interacts with people and other animals and catalogue the clues it conveys.

"So, when my dog is stressed, what do they look like? Where is their tail? How are their ears? When my dog's really happy, what do they look like? When my dog doesn't like something, what happens next?"

Chandler thinks it's a big part of dog park etiquette to be aware of who your dog is as an individual and what kind of personality they have.

"Do I have a dog that has five different very clear warnings that they give, or do I have a dog that gives one, maybe two, and then it's done? So, really getting to know your dog's communication style and what those things look like."

GOOD RECALL SKILLS

"I think that a really important part of long-term preparation for dog parks is teaching a solid recall," Chandler said. "Making that recall actually something that your dog anticipates and looks forward to, as opposed to a recall where it's like 'Oh man, every time my people call me it means that we have to go home, and the fun is over.'"

Instead, change your dog's perception of what recall is and build a foundation of them



A leash walk prior to visiting a dog park will help manage your dog's excitement level, says professional dog trainer Christina Chandler. (PHOTO: ROGUE PET PHOTOGRAPHY)

wanting to come back to you. Your attention is what dogs live for, and calling them back every so often to reward them with a quick bit of play or praise, will do wonders.

On that point, Chandler says the dog park is not a time for scrolling through your phone or chatting exclusively with a friend; it's a time to engage with your dog.

"I really want to teach people when they come to classes with me, or when I do private lessons, to work on building engagement and value in the relationship between the person and the dog." For more helpful tips, visit aligncaninetraining.com.