

Risk/Benefit Consideration for Allowing Pets within a Children's Play Area

Dear City Council,

I am writing you to open a discussion about the presence of family pets within the children's park. I am Doctor of Veterinary Medicine with years of experience working with both dogs and cats. I currently have three dogs, a cat, and two daughters, and I truly love my pets as family. I personally LOVE the idea of having my pets and other people's pets around when playing with my kids at the park, but I have seen and know too much to think that this is a safe practice. Unfortunately, the general population is not aware of the risks associated with this practice. Thus, I am writing you to bring to your attention the risks to our pets and children when allowing dogs within the children's park. I understand that no known issues have been reported thus far (though please keep in mind that the source of many illnesses/disease in our children will never be traceable back to the canine source); however, even just one incident is one too many. I implore you to educate yourselves and the public in order to protect both the children and their pets.

Benefits:

- Stronger family-pet relationships:
 - Pet owners often consider their pets to be a part of the family, just as I do. Allowing the pet to spend time with the family/children creates a sense of bonding and builds their relationship.
- Increased pet and child socialization:
 - Bringing a pet to any public area is an opportunity to contribute to a well socialized family pet.
 - However, caution must be used when allowing a pet to socialize around children, as outlined below.
 - Also, it hopefully provides an opportunity for children to interact positively with a dog, helping to build their love and empathy of animals.
- Happy people!
 - Permitting pets within the park will make a large population of the city happy, as we all love our pets and want them to be included in family activities.

Risks:

- Trauma to pets and children due to poor socialization
 - Although we hope that dogs and children will have positive experiences, this may not always be the case. Unfortunately, many "well-socialized dogs" may show severe unease, reactivity, or even aggression around children. Dogs do not view children as adult humans, and they often don't know how to react. Additionally, an owner may think that their dog is great with children, but a negative experience could lead to subsequent aggression and behavioral problems. I have seen MANY dogs who are very nice, but they react aggressively when "pushed" past their limit by a child (or by me at the animal hospital).
 - Children also may not know how to properly interact with a dog. A dog owner may assume that their pet will not be approached without consent or approached gently, but this cannot be guaranteed. Despite our efforts, a child may run up to a dog, pull its hair or tail, or otherwise startle/hurt the animal. IF the animal reacts aggressively and a child has a negative experience, this could cause severe emotional trauma and even lead to a fear of dogs. These types of fears take a long time to overcome, if ever. Obviously, this could also lead to severe physical trauma to the child. A mild dog bite is bad enough in a child- it can lead to broken bones and severe infection. However, a true dog attack can be fatal to an adult, let alone a small child.
 - Ultimately, we are trusting that BOTH the dog AND the child are already well socialized and know exactly how to act around one another. There are simply too many factors that can affect the response of both, and there are too many consequences if things go awry, such as:
 - Emotional trauma to the child
 - Physical trauma to the child
 - Emotional trauma to and subsequent behavioral issues with the dog
 - Legal implications to the dog owner, such as criminal charges, civil liability, etc.

- Euthanasia of the dog if the injuries were severe or if he/she is a repeat offender. *Although this is sometimes best (whether enforced by law or the owner's decision), it is also very sad, as it could be avoided by responsible laws and pet owners.
- Disease control challenges
 - There are many zoonotic diseases that can be spread from dogs to humans. Most are spread through feces, but urine, vectors, and direct contact are also responsible for disease spread. Although we can hope that pet owners are cleaning their animal's feces from the park, even a pet owner is unable to remove microscopic parasites or remove urine from the ground. Consider the below listed common zoonotic diseases and their effects on people. Keep in mind that children are at particular risk due to decrease immunity, oral fixations, and general increased exposure when playing in the park as opposed to adults.
 - Leptospirosis
 - Lepto is a bacterium that is spread through urine. If a child were to put contaminated material in his/her mouth (food that dropped or perhaps a young child that likes to taste test the dirt) OR get contaminated urine in a cut (say on bare feet), he/she could become infected. Infections with lepto can lead to kidney damage, meningitis (inflammation of the membrane around the brain and spinal cord), liver failure, respiratory distress, and even death.
 - Roundworms
 - In pets, roundworms are intestinal parasites that can lead to malnutrition. Children and adults can also obtain the worms through infected soil, feces ingestion, or potentially via a dog licking near their face/mouth after self-grooming. In people, the worm may not just go to the gastrointestinal tract and cause issues; instead, it often goes awry to the eyes, lungs, heart, or brain. Thus, infection can lead to vision loss, lung disease, heart issues, and neurologic signs.
 - Hookworms
 - Hookworms are also a gastrointestinal parasite, but they can lead to severe anemia as they feed off the host's blood supply. Humans can obtain these worms through ingestion of feces or contaminated soil OR via skin contact with feces, such as a child simply touching contaminated debris. Hookworms in people can cause a skin rash, gastrointestinal problems, and anemia.
 - Giardia/Salmonella
 - Giardia is a protozoal infection that causes diarrhea in dogs and humans. Salmonella is a bacterial infection that also causes diarrhea. Both can be transferred to humans via the fecal-oral route (this includes a dog contagious dog licking on or near the face after self-grooming). In young children, these diseases can lead to severe dehydration from diarrhea and are difficult to treat.
 - Rabies
 - Rabies is no longer a common disease, but it is the most deadly. Rabies is transferred through saliva via bites or scratches. In up to 99% of human cases, domestic dogs are responsible for transmission of the disease. A dog can be infected for 2-8 weeks (the incubation period) without showing any clinical signs. Fortunately, a dog is not contagious to humans/other animals until he/she is showing clinical signs.
 - Although most pet owners are diligent about rabies vaccinating their pets, there are situations in which an owner may not know that their dog is infected. For example, a newly rescued dog may seem perfectly healthy, have a clear exam from the vet, and be vaccinated...all while being infected and not yet showing signs of disease. Thus, at the early onset of clinical signs, an owner may not yet take the animal to the vet. This is the period when the animal could inadvertently infect others prior to diagnosis.

- These are just a few of the more common zoonotic diseases; unfortunately, many more exist. It is unsafe to assume that all dogs who come into the park are healthy, vaccinated against leptospirosis and rabies, and dewormed with no intestinal parasites. Even a pet owner may not know if their dog has contracted a parasite or disease. A dog could have just been infected at a dog park with an intestinal parasite or leptospirosis and not yet be showing any obvious/concerning clinical signs. Dogs vaccinated against leptospirosis can still get some forms of the disease and be a source of disease for others.
- Emotional stress to adults/children
 - Some adults or children may have an already existing fear of dogs. This is often severe and out of their control. These people cannot enjoy the parks due to emotional distress. Sadly, this hinders their ability to enjoy what should be a children's park where they feel safe and can have fun.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please don't hesitate to contact me with further questions, concerns, or thoughts at AnnaSimmonsDVM@yahoo.com.

Kind regards,

Dr. Anna Simmons