

My dog was attacked at the park

DAVID EDDIE The Globe and Mail

The question

I have a small dog, weighing about 40 pounds. I have come to realize that bringing my dog to the park is equivalent to bringing a three-year-old kid to a playground. Owners gather in cliques, gossip and talk continuously about their dogs and how great they are - which, I admit, I am guilty of myself. After some time, you get to know the usual suspects. The problem is that my dog was recently attacked by another dog when they were both going after the same stick. The owner of the dog was nowhere in sight and other people around me had to attempt to pull the 120-pound animal off of mine. In the end, my dog had a couple of bite marks that turned out to need stitches. When the owner finally appeared, I tried to talk to her about the incident, but received nothing but attitude and some serious lip.

I am not the kind to bring up legal liability, and all I was looking for was some accountability and an apology. Is this too much to ask?

The answer

Dog parks represent a special damage control challenge.

Actually, it's good practice, I think. Most human interactions, at least in the circles I travel in, tend to be decorous, civil and polite; the hostilities remain bottled up, the irritations unexpressed.

Dogs, on the other hand, will snap and scrap.

Almost any dog will scrap if pushed. My dog Murphy, a Wheaten cross, is a lover, not a fighter. He has the soul of a shaggy Irish poet. A lover of man and beast alike, he wants to enjoy in peace and harmony his brief sojourn on this earth. (We "give birth astride of a grave," as Samuel Beckett says. "The light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." How true! And how much more painfully, poignantly true for our canine companions.)

On the other hand, he is a terrier. And terriers take crap from no bitch's whelp. To be honest, I admire his bravery. Rottweiler, Great Dane, labradoodle: He'll take them all on. He has the heart of a lion. He has no reverse gear. He'll keep coming at you.

He's not an instigator. But if you start something with him, he's not the type to back down.

The other owners (or, if you prefer, "human companions") in my dog park understand: Scraps happen. In a split second what was friendly play turns ugly. And since dogs fight by growling and barking and viciously snapping at each other's faces, it can be quite a jarring display of raw aggression.

But as long as the owners keep their cool and obey dog park protocol, as most people in my park do, everyone, human and canine, can still walk away friends.

Here's the protocol: If your dog is fighting with another dog, much as you may not feel like it, you have to get in there fast and pull your dog out.

Grab your animal by the hind legs. Don't try to go in via the front, as many mistakenly do. You could get badly bitten.

Leash your dog. Reprimand him or her sternly. Then apologize profusely to the other dog's owner. If your dog was the instigator and has caused some harm or injury to the other dog, immediately and without equivocation offer to pay the vet bill.

(The loftiest and most idealistic interpretation of the protocol may suggest you should offer to pay the vet bill no matter which dog started it, but I think if your dog was just defending itself, you're not on the hook to shell out any shekels.)

Above all, you are responsible for keeping an eye on, and a reasonable amount of control over, your dog. "Well, I was on the cellphone/wasn't watching" is no excuse. You brought your dog to the park and therefore you are responsible for everything the dog does. Morally, your dog is an extension of you.

Now, since this person you encountered in the park refuses to observe these protocols - controlling her canine, apologizing, offering to make restitution in the case of injury - of the human pack, she has established herself as a stray, a lone wolf, a pariah dog, a dingo.

In my experience, attempting to extract an apology from this particular breed of human cur is futile. It's like trying to take a stick from a dog's mouth. She'll just shake her head, growl and snap at you.

All you can really do in this circumstance is what you've already started doing: Talk about it. The people who come to the dog park form a loose community, as you've observed. Tell them your story. I predict they will give you a lot of sympathy and fellow-feeling. And if this woman exhibits a pattern of disregard for the rules of the pack, she may be shunned.

Not that she'll ever notice, or care, or have any understanding of what she's missing. But it's her loss. Much as I loathe the endless, pointless, Sisyphean nightmare of having to take my dog to the park two or sometimes three times a day (and pick up his stinking, steaming "offerings" with a plastic bag), I do enjoy the social aspect of it.

Many people make good friends in the dog park. I know lots of people who go out to dinners and parties with their dog park friends. Certainly there is quite a bit of networking that goes on. Cards are exchanged, and I know numerous cases of people who've gotten jobs and gigs from dog park encounters.

She has chosen to turn her back on these benefits. Fine. Ignore her, and try to forget your encounter with this perhaps slightly rabid stray. Concentrate on being the best person you can be, and helping your "animal companion" to be the best behaved animal it can be, too.

If you do that, I predict treats will be in store for both of you.