

Caring For Your Dog at Festivals, Family Events

In the summer and fall, outdoor events and picnics are a great way to spend time with family and friends, get out in the fresh air, enjoy some good food, and maybe enjoy some fireworks or music.

But what about our best buddy? Do they have to stay home alone all day while you're out socializing? With a little planning, your dog can join in on the fun too!

If you want to successfully share in summer festivities with your dog, be sure that their comfort and safety are top of mind.

Preparation is key! Here are some items to consider prior to the event to prepare yourself and your dog.

Are they invited?

This is perhaps one of the most important things to do. Contact the organizers of the event to ensure the event is dog friendly and ask any questions you may have to ensure your dog's safety. If the organizer is hesitant (even if they are family) or say things that make you feel it is not the best place for your dog – leave them at home.

Socialization

Is your dog okay with people and other dogs? At a gathering they will be meeting all kinds of people, with and without their own dogs. Have you done safe meet and greets with people of all ages and sizes and, also with dogs young and old? Have you exposed your dog to those that are rambunctious or those that are a little timid?

If you aren't sure or haven't socialized them, we suggest you spend some time doing this before you take them to an event. Go on a local walk. Be aware of your dog's reaction and how they greet others – humans and dogs – and get them familiarized with meeting others.

Noises, Weather, and Fireworks!

In addition to socializing with people and other dogs, ensuring that your dog is used to noises and lots of activity such as loud music, chatting people, and cars is important before they are exposed to these things at a gathering.

Is your dog ok with umbrellas, mud, and water? What about sun hats and cooling station misters? The weather can play a big factor in what they will be exposed to at the festival – including what people might be wearing (think costumes). Be sure to look at the forecast and use that knowledge to determine whether your dog can safely attend.

Holidays and evening events sometimes bring out the fireworks. This can be very startling and harmful to your pets if they are not used to loud noises and all that excitement. Many dogs get spooked when the loud, sudden sounds of fireworks are set off and bolt in panic. Tragically, many become lost and some even lose their lives. If possible, please leave your dog at home if you are going some place where you know there will be fireworks.

Here are some suggested items for you to consider bringing to the event for your dog.

Supplies – A leash, food and water bowls, a knapsack to help you carry everything, poop bags, a dog bed, or a towel for them to rest on (or a cooling mat, depending on where you're going.) Consider a long line if you think you might be securing them and something that you can secure the line to if needed.

Secure collars and/or harnesses - As you know, dogs can easily startle (even the most socialized of dogs), and owners need to be prepared for that. Loose collars or harnesses are a risk if a dog startles, as they may back up and slip out then escape. Always have a buckle collar that is fitted properly. The rule is that, when secure, only 2 fingers can slip under the collar. Before leaving home, double check that your dog's collar and harness are snug and can't be removed by tugging and/or pulling. Put tags on their collars for identification. Another suggestion to provide extra security is to add a martingale, harness and then double leash, one attached to their collar and the other to their harness.

Food & Water - Ensure you bring a supply of food and lots of water (or know where you can get some at the event).

Toys – Bring their favourite chew toys or some enrichment toys like a stuffed Kong, a snuffle mat, etc. If they like to play fetch, then bring a ball, frisbee, or any other retrieving toy.

Treats – Healthy dog treats that can help keep them cool as well – such as frozen watermelon and apples can be great!

Great! You did all your preparation work and now you and your dog are ready to attend your gathering. Here are some suggestions for when you arrive.

Acclimatize & find shade - When you arrive, you want to acclimatize your dog to their surroundings and what's going on. Walk around with them and visit booths and people. If you are unsure of how your dog will react, be prepared to leave. Park close-by so you can take them home if they are nervous or too hot. Once you are at the event, if it's sunny and hot out, you want to find an area that has shade.

Secure your dog - If you can, secure your dog safely either on their leash or, maybe, to a tree or a stake in the ground – you need to be always supervising your dog on those long lines. Make sure that they're not getting their legs tangled – that can easily happen if we're not supervising. Bring their bed or blanket for them to lie on. Ensure that the leash is secured firmly, and that there are no hazards or ways that it can get loose, and the dog can take off.

Beware of food and trash - Events will have food and snacks, so keep your dog away, especially from the cooking areas. Be aware of picnic scraps that could cause them harm. Stay away from the trash because that's where everybody is going to be throwing away all their paper plates or food. There could be grapes, onions, garlic, cutlery, or hotdogs - all of those things can be dangerous, even toxic, to a dog. Watch out for chicken bones and chicken wings, as those cooked bones that are shattered can be harmful if they're ingested by the dogs.

Keep them entertained - Scatter a few treats and toys at the area you selected for them so that they can keep themselves entertained. Bring a snuffle mat or stuffed Kong for fun. Also make sure that your dog can explore the area that you're around. You know they love to sniff and explore.

Hydrate - Always make sure that you have fresh water for your dog, especially in the heat.

Stay close to your dogs. Keep them in your sight. Don't abandon or leave them. And especially when you go to a festival or other event, do not secure your dog and then leave them unsupervised while you're walking around, when there are all kinds of different members of the public around. You don't want to risk frightening or, worse, losing your dog.

Most of all, make sure both of you are having fun and enjoying the event.



Corey McCusker, CPDT-KA, is the founder of Muttz with Mannerz Canine Academy located in Stouffville. In addition, Corey is an evaluator for St John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program and created the first Kids & K9 Camp in Canada.