

Dog day afternoons

Kath Dolan



From left: Imogen Miller, with son Tristan and daughter Olivia, and Lisa Masters (centre) meet up with regulars at the Donald McDonald Reserve in Beaumaris.

Picture: *Rebecca Hallas*

Walking dogs communally is a great way to expand your social life, says Kath Dolan.

A long-haired Weimaraner named Toby introduced Imogen Miller to her best friend, Rachel Douglas. The Beaumaris mothers met while walking their beloved dogs in the local off-lead park, the Donald McDonald Reserve, several years ago and struck up a friendship that began with small talk about their pets. This quickly graduated to impromptu afternoon get-togethers where kids, dogs and grown-ups forged firm friendships.

Now the pair and their broods meet several times a week on the heath near Sandringham College, a mecca for a huge network of dog owners who have formed all kinds of friendships and a good old-fashioned sense of community. Some of the older women swap recipes and one man sits down with a friend each Friday for "a bottle of beer and a catch-up," she says. The pattern is repeated at off-lead parks, beaches and other open, dog-friendly spaces around Melbourne on a daily basis. Dogs, it seems, are good for your social life.

In Travancore Park, near Flemington, a close-knit bunch that meets most afternoons now holds a party at Christmas time. In Richmond's Barkly Gardens there's a young couple who met while walking their dogs (one big and one little - proving, yet again, that opposites do attract). On Mentone Beach, firm friends who'd struggle to tell you each other's surnames keep up to date on what's going on in each others' lives while their pets frolic on the foreshore.

Professional dog walker Lisa Masters says Black Rock residents out for a walk often discover that their dogs seem to know half the neighbourhood, having bonded at the off-lead haunt while the owners were at work.

The highly combustible combination of excited kids and a Hairy Maclary-esque rabble of dogs on the tear could be a recipe for disaster but Miller says the dynamic on communal walks is surprisingly harmonious. "There are some other people who don't have kids who have started to meet us quite regularly," she says. "The other day, there were seven dogs, five adults and six children all walking around the park together. It was hilarious. There's never any fighting. The dogs just want to go sniff and wee and chase balls and look for food - they love it."

Friendships formed through pets seem to cross cultural and age barriers and often involve helping when someone is sick or needs help caring for a pet. Masters, whose dog-walking, socialising and training business, Jog the Dog, grew out of casual walks in her local off-lead park, says she's answered several SOS calls from elderly clients who have become ill suddenly and need a hand. "The friendships are (such) that you see these people every day and you get to know them...and they trust you with their pets and know they can call you at the last minute," she says. "One lady I hadn't even met yet rang me from hospital and...said, 'I'm supposed to be meeting you next week, but I'm in hospital. Can I just tell you where the spare key is and can you please go and buy some food and I'll reimburse you later?' "

What began as a favour to some local school mums who didn't have time to train their puppies in off-lead behaviour and socialising has grown into a profitable business built on recommendations from friends made at the park. Masters now has 35 canine clients and works seven days a week, 365 days a year.

A dog-owner her whole life, she says that, even as a child, she noticed how dogs could act as conversational ice-breakers for adults. Like people, dogs are also inherently social creatures. "Dogs need to get into the scrum and be dogs," she says. "They are pack animals."

Luckily, their effortlessness in making friends tends to rub off on their owners.

Check with your local council for off-lead parks near you.