



# Party animals make friends

DOG park parties may be a key to creating connections within a community, according to town planning experts.

"Research undertaken by town planner, Virginia Jackson, shows that dogs are a conversation starter for 94 per cent of people who take their dogs to dog parks and that 38 per cent of people who meet at dog parks have gone on to become more than just passing acquaintances," says Susie Willis from the Petcare Information and Advisory Service.

"Other research undertaken recently at the University of Western Australia shows that companion animals help strengthen social fabric and we have identified a number of events, such as Christmas, that are celebrated at dog parks around Australia and bring communities together."

Residents in the City of Yarra celebrate Christmas with a dog park party that is attended by about 80 people and their pets.

"I've lived in the area for about 16 years but it wasn't until I got my dog, Susie, 10 years ago that the area really opened up to me," community nurse and party organizer, Sally Martin said.

"One of the most frequently report-

ed benefits of this type of event is that it gives people who don't know many others in their community an 'excuse' to join in and meet new people," Ms Willis said.

"We find that even non-dog owners attend some parties as a way of meeting or catching up with friends and neighbours."

With many dog park regulars expected to join in the festivities in the coming month, the Petcare Information and Advisory Service has developed tips for a pet party that everyone can enjoy.

Make sure the area where you are planning to hold the party is an off leash area, regulations can change at different times of the year.

Encourage all pet owners to bring what they need for the day but make sure you have extra water and spare bowls. A shady area that can be shared by pets and people, spare "poo" bags and stakes that people can use to tie their dog's leash to will also be appreciated.

It can be a good idea to make it clear to other park users that there is a party in progress by hanging banners in the trees or something similar. If in doubt, check with your council if there

are any special requirements.

It can be fun to dress up your pet for a Christmas party. Tinsel or baubles temporarily attached to a dog's collar are fine and many dogs won't mind humouring their owners by dressing up in reindeer antlers for a short time, but your dog will generally prefer the "less is more" approach to Christmas finery.

Parties are all about fun so make sure there are healthy treats for well behaved dogs. Some parties even organise for Santa to drop in with presents and treats.

Make sure there are plenty of activities to keep dogs busy. You can organize games such as the "11 legged race" (a three legged race with owners accompanied by their dogs) or competitions for dogs such as "the waggiest tail".

At the end of the party, make sure the area is clean.

"Dog park parties are great fun for everyone and the key to a successful event is to make sure that everyone understands their responsibilities while joining in the party spirit," Ms Willis said.



**CONVERSATION STARTERS:** Pet parties are a great way for people to get to know each other.