



Dog Day Care – Asking all the right questions

Dog day care has been around for many years; they are very popular and seem to be popping up all around town. It can be a wonderful outlet for your dog and a great solution to your busy lifestyle.....but is it right for your dog and what makes a good day care?

Day cares are owned and operated by a wide variety of people from professional dog trainers or veterinarians to people who (hopefully) like dogs and want to make money while being self-employed. Before you choose to leave your furry family member in someone else's don't be shy about interviewing and touring more than one facility. Location may be optimal in real estate, but should not be the defining reason you choose a dog day care.

I visit as many dog day cares as I can and have been amazed at the reception I have gotten. Some of the day cares are proud of their facility and eagerly show it off while answering all of my questions. On the other end of the spectrum, some of the facilities acted as though I were trying to pry national secrets from them by asking them what their basic safety and security protocols are. When you interview a facility, beware of the facilities that are not happy to answer all of your questions! Here is a list of questions for you to ask a potential day care.

May I Tour the Facility? – Does it look and smell clean? Some places will let you see the area your dog will play and some won't. There are several reasons that a facility will not allow you to be in the dog area including:

Insurance reasons – if you were to get hurt either by interacting with a dog or slipping and falling, the facility would be held liable for any damage.

The dogs' safety – strangers entering the area can cause excitability that can lead to skirmishes between the dogs.

For facilities that don't allow you back to the dog area, they should at the very least have web cams you can watch or a viewing area. If they don't allow you to see the area in some way – it is best not to leave your dog there.

Will My Dog Get Rest Periods? – Dogs are typically in a heightened state of arousal/excitement while around many other dogs. Many facilities offer ½ day visits but if your dog is going to be in day care for more than 4 hours, he/she needs a rest period of at least 2 hours either 2 hours at once or two 1 hour rests. Some facilities will rotate dogs through with rest periods in between play sessions and some will put all of the dogs in crates for a rest period.

Can My Dog Escape? – Security is important, does the facility have a double gate system at every exit? There should be 2 gates between any area that your dog will be off leash and any outside exit – and those gates should ALWAYS be shut – self closing gates are the best bet. If the dogs will be taken out to potty it should be in an enclosed area, staff members walking dogs on leash to an open area poses too many security risks.

What if There is an Emergency? – Does the facility have a written emergency plan? What happens if there is a dog fight, fire or building evacuation? Every employee should be able to tell you what they would do in case of an emergency – don't ask the owner, ask at least 2 employees you meet during your tour. If they can show you the plan, that is a bonus!

What do You Clean With? – Does the facility use a cleaning agent that kills Parvo virus and Giardia? How often do you clean? There are many cleaners including a 1:30 bleach solution that kills bacteria, germs and parasites – make sure the facility uses one that does – every day. If you ask an employee if their cleaning agent kills Parvo and Giardia and they say they don't know or they aren't even sure what Parvo or Giardia is – do not leave your pet there!

What is Your Vaccination Protocol? – What vaccines does the facility require and how do they keep track when dogs are due? All facilities should require dogs to be vaccinated for DHPP, Bordetella and Rabies and be on monthly heartworm and flea prevention. Some facilities will require a fecal exam to be done either every year or every 6 months.

How Much Space Will My Dog Have? – How many square feet is the play area and how many dogs are allowed in that area? Unfortunately, the popularity of dog day care and greed sometimes make a bad combination. There should be a minimum of 50 - 75 square feet of space for every medium to large dog – so a 500 square foot play area should hold no more than 7 - 10 medium sized dogs at a time. There should be a minimum of 50 square feet of space for every small dog. Too many day cares are crowding as many dogs into a space as possible which can create increased number of fights and a safety hazard for the staff and the other dogs when a fight does break out. Each dog should have room to break into a run and to move away if there is too much activity, he/she feels threatened or if there is a fight. ***Every day care should have a maximum number of dogs allowed in any area and the staff should know what that maximum is.***

What is Your Staff to Dog Ratio – how many dogs are there per staff member? For medium to large dogs there should be 10-12 dogs per staff member, for small dogs 12-15 is a safe number. Any more than that and it becomes a safety hazard for the dogs. There needs to be sufficient staffing to watch the dogs, break up any unacceptable play, clean up after the dogs and move dogs in and out of the play area.

How Do You Introduce New Dogs? – One dog at a time or very slow introductions should be the only way they introduce a new dog. The perfect way to introduce a new dog is to require the new dog to be the first dog of the day. A staff member dedicated to

that dog while all the other dogs arrive one at a time with enough time in between each incoming dog for the new dog to be comfortable with the dogs he/she has already met.

How Do You Separate Play Groups? – There should be separation based not only on size, but on temperament. A 12 year old 80 pound Lab may do better with the small dogs, a 20 pound Jack Russell Terrier may do better with the large dogs. If there is no separation, I don't recommend any dog under 30 pounds go to that day care.

What Training Does Your Staff Have? – The staff should have a formal training plan on dog communication (body language), breed and play styles, how to break up a fight, what the emergency plan is and be certified in pet first aid & CPR.

What Rules Do You Enforce? – Staff members should always enforce no jumping on people and not bolting through any door as well as know when to interrupt play that is becoming too intense. What about barking? I would not recommend any day care that allows shock or citronella bark collars. If your dog is an extreme barker, teach them to stop barking on command and inform the staff how to enforce it.

Do You Have Food in the Play Area? – It is best not to allow any food or treats in the play area. If your dog gets a mid-day snack or meal, it should be given during rest periods when they are isolated.

Is your dog a good candidate? Not all dogs are good candidates for day care. Many dogs are social with people but would prefer not to be around other dogs. Dogs that are resource guarders, incessant herders or easily over stimulated may not be right for day care. Dogs with health concerns like diabetes, hip dysplasia or arthritis may be fine in day care, may need a quieter play group or not be a good candidate at all.

Should you continue going? If your dog does not want to get out of the car after the 3rd or 4th visit to the day care, that is a sign that your dog does not like it. If your dog starts to have undesirable behaviors at home, that is a sign you should not like the day care. All day cares are different and have a different set of rules and dogs – try more than one day care before giving up on day care completely.

How often should my dog go? There are some dogs that benefit from day care 5 days a week, but those dogs are rare. Over stimulation and too much social pressure can cause many dogs to develop inappropriate behaviors and/or anxiety issues. Most dogs benefit from 1-3 days of day care per week with days off in between for rest and recuperation.

Pay close attention to customer service – how does the staff treat you on the phone and in person? How they treat you is a good indicator of how they will treat your dog. Do they pay attention to you, answer your questions, look you in the eye or are they too busy, not interested or just don't seem to care.

Make a checklist with all the questions you want to ask and take that with you when you check out a facility (be sure to leave your dog at home while you are interviewing). The

day care you choose will be caring for an important part of your family and you will most likely be spending a fair amount of money there, so don't be shy! Expect good customer service and knowledgeable, professional and skillful care from the staff as well as the owner. The benefits of day care are vast and well worth the effort it takes to find a good facility - if your dog is a good candidate. There is nothing like coming home after a long tiring day to a tired, satisfied and happy dog!

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