

How to find a good dog day care

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Tacoma animal trainer Kathy Sdao, pictured left with her dog Effie, answers this week's question. (Photo by jonsmithphotos.com)

Question: I think my dog would benefit from spending time with other dogs in day care. But I'm concerned about finding the best facility for her.

I've scouted some places, but they aren't meeting my expectations: too many dogs, not enough employees to watch them. Some places have a distinctive "dog" odor that I don't want to bring home.

How do I know my dog will be safe at a facility (safe from snatching or safe with the other dogs)? What kinds of things should I be aware of when inspecting a facility? What questions should I ask? What kind of check list should I craft?

Answer: Dog day cares first started popping up in the United States in the mid 1990s. In 1996, I, along with co-founder Marcy Miller, launched the first one in Tacoma, Puget Hound Daycare. Since then, I've consulted with many such businesses to improve their functionality, design and safety. Given this, let me offer a few guidelines for choosing the best day care for your dog.

First, day care is not appropriate for all dogs. Your dog isn't defective if she doesn't enjoy hanging out all day with a couple dozen rowdy teens. Many middle-aged or older dogs who have not previously had a variety of canine friends are unenthusiastic about suddenly going "clubbing."

Additionally, some adolescent dogs get overwhelmed by all the activity and adrenaline. Combine a few of these in a room with spotty human supervision and you may quickly create a scene reminiscent of "Lord of the Flies."

Aware of this, the best dog day cares conduct a thorough behavioral assessment of all new dogs. They should ask you to answer a written questionnaire about your dog's behavioral and medical history, but this is not sufficient.

During your dog's first day at the facility -- typically a half-day, to ease her into the new situation -- the day care supervisor or a senior staff member should test your dog on behaviors such as her willingness to be handled by humans, responsiveness to training cues, composure while alone in a kennel and interest in interacting with dogs. This screening procedure should be structured and objective. Ask to review their written assessment.

In addition to the initial screening of new dogs, the two most critical variables in judging a dog day care are the competence of the staff and the safety of the facilities and activities.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

You'd think that the people supervising groups of large, boisterous dogs would be educated in animal training and management.

Don't bet your dog's life on it.

The number of folks with no background in animal behavior who open a dog day care because they're "sick of working with people" is stupefying. In most states, laws regulating the staffing of dog day cares are scanty or nonexistent.

So it's your responsibility to ask plenty of questions:

- Who will be supervising my dog's interactions with other dogs?
- What's the ratio of humans to dogs? (A good rule of thumb: Iowa state law specifies, "A day care shall not establish a playgroup composed of more than 15 dogs.")
- Will there be a competent staff person physically present with the dogs at all times?
- What educational requirements do you have for new hires? What ongoing education and training does the day care staff receive?

-- How do you control the dog's behavior? Do you use punishment (e.g., reprimands, scruff shakes, squirt bottles, loud noises, citronella anti-bark collars, shock collars)? If so, ask to see the written policies.

These should limit the use of any of these punishments to the rarest of situations, with one exception: flee if they ever use shock collars.

-- What kind of rewards are used? Facilities that generously and skillfully use healthy, tiny food treats to reinforce the dogs' good behavior are usually able to avoid using physical force to maintain order.

Answers such as "treats are too much trouble" or "they cause fighting between the dogs" reveal a lack of training skill.

Know that the only viable option to the use of treats as a strong motivator of compliant behavior from the day care dogs is the use of threats.

Next, try to gauge how protected your dog will be from injury, escape or stress. Any social activity -- for humans or animals -- involves some degree of risk. You need to ensure that the day care staff is aware of potential harms and has safety as their utmost priority.

I worry about dog day cares whose main message is "our dogs have rip-roaring fun." I prefer the emphasis to be more like that of flight attendants: to provide a safe, secure, supportive environment.

What does that look like? My checklist includes:

The dogs are naked. Except for their arrival at day care and departure at the end of the day, the dogs aren't wearing collars or harnesses. Accidental strangulations are surprisingly common and completely avoidable.

If the staff says "but we need to grab their collars to break up fights," be concerned that they don't have a better plan.

Speaking of which, ask to see the written protocol for breaking up a dogfight. If they say that fights never happen, don't believe it.

There should be equipment readily available in every playroom to aid in breaking up a dog scuffle -- or worse. These "fight kits" might include Kevlar gloves, slip-leads, citronella spray and more.

While you're at it, ask to look at their emergency plan.

The worst day of owning Puget Hound Daycare was when a freak accident caused the floor-to-ceiling glass windows at the front of the building to suddenly

shatter. One dog escaped through the gaping hole, and a few others were cut by broken glass. But because Marcye and I were ex-zookeepers, we immediately reverted to our well-rehearsed "escaped animal" protocol and were able to minimize the damage.

All day cares should have a plan to respond to a fire or earthquake.

Are there double barriers between all off-leash dogs and the wide world of freedom?

Loose dogs should never have access to a door exiting to the parking lot or the street. It's too easy for them to escape if that door is ever ajar.

What does the rest area look like?

There must be a quiet secure place where the dogs rest for at least two hours each day. It's unnatural and unhealthy for dogs to play with each other, uninterrupted, for eight or more hours a day.

Businesses that brag that they never have the dogs off the play-floor misunderstand their responsibility to provide a balance of activities and rest. Preferably each dog has an individual kennel run or large crate in which to nap.

Don't be put off if the day care limits the number of times per week your dog can attend. This is a clue that they're valuing your dog's behavioral health over their bottom line.

For many dogs, especially energetic young ones, attending a day care five days per week is simply too much time on the playground; it can create problems such as bullying, barking or impulsiveness.

A separate playroom for small dogs and for young pups is safest. Tiny dogs, even confident ones, are at much greater risk of injury in a room full of large dogs.

I once witnessed the fifteen dogs at my day care turn from playful to predatory in an instant, when a Weimaraner yelped after getting his paw caught in the fencing. We were able to quickly interrupt their surprising attack -- there was no injury -- but I fear things may have been more dire had this been a toy dog who yelped.

These tips should help you sort the wheat from the chaff when it comes to dog day cares.

I didn't mention the more obvious requirements (e.g., requirements for

vaccinations or titers, no dogs in heat, no sick dogs, policies regarding who pays for medical treatments in case of injury).

But because you asked about it, I suggest you visit a facility more than once to evaluate the "doggy smell." Sometimes a terrific day care can smell bad temporarily; after all, poop happens.

Kathy Sdao

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