



Whatcom Road Veterinary Hospital

Pet Health Information Series

Doggy Day Care Basics

Should your dog go to day care? Well, it depends. If you have a large group of friends with canine companions that regularly walk together or go to the park together, you probably don't need doggy day care. If you work long hours and your pet is left alone, or if you have mobility issues and can't get out, then you should consider sending your dog to doggy day care.

Doggy day care offers your dog the chance to socialize and play with other dogs. No one can play with a dog like a dog can. No one can communicate with a dog quite as well as another dog. Doggy day care gives your dog the chance to, quite simply, be a dog. It's a great way to keep up basic communication skills and let them burn off energy. Day care is great for the socialized confident dog that needs to burn off excess steam and energy.

Doggy day care is **not** the place to take your dog if it is not socialized. If your dog has behavioural issues, get them into training first. After they have completed some basic training, find a doggy day care that employs a trainer who can continue working with your dog.

If you take a dog that is a bully to doggy day care, the situation will get worse. They will learn that the bullying works and they will hone those skills. Meanwhile, a slightly nervous dog may become more confident if he gets the chance to play with gentle calmer dogs. But that slightly nervous dog may become worse if the dogs he has to deal with are rambunctious. Dogs with mild separation anxiety may be helped with doggy day care but dogs with severe separation anxiety will not improve. So if your dog has any sort of behavioural issues, those need to be addressed first, before day care even enters the picture.

A good day care facility will have separate areas for dogs of similar size, age and play styles. If you go into a day care facility you will see that the dogs naturally separate themselves into groups where the high energy dogs play together, the retriever types congregate, and the terriers wrestle together. They have the chance to find a friend. You need to be aware that older dogs may simply find the activity too much.

The dogs that attend day care need to be socialized with people as well as with other dogs. If your dog will not come to your day

care worker in the event of an escape, or if the day care worker can't separate your dog during a fight without getting bitten, it's a problem.

If after careful and honest consideration, you have decided that day care would be great for your dog, the next challenge is finding one that is compatible with your dog and with which you feel comfortable.

There are currently three basic doggy day care styles: smaller in-home daycares; larger commercial daycares; and hiking clubs.

Should your dog be in a secure facility or should it participate in a hiking club? Again, it depends. If your dog knows its commands and will listen to others and your dog inherently stays with the group, then the hiking club style of doggy day care is fine. If your dog runs like the wind the moment it is off leash, then the hiking club style is not for him. Personally, I prefer a secure facility. Is your dog better off in a small home facility or in a larger commercial daycare? Yet again, it depends. A well run smaller in-home facility may be better for a slightly nervous dog.

Keep in mind the reason why you are taking your dog to day care. Are those requirements being met? Ultimately, trust your instincts.

Now that you have narrowed down the choices, here are some of the questions you need to ask and some of the points you need to consider when assessing a doggy day care:

- Do they request an interview with you and do they want to assess your dog before they permit your dog to join their facility? (They should!)
- Do they require current vaccinations (distemper, parvovirus, adenovirus, Bordetella and rabies) or a letter from your veterinarian? (Again, they should!)
- Is the day care secure? Ideally, it should be double fenced. Minimally, the walls should be 8 ft high and the fencing should go below ground.
- Is there a sign in/sign out procedure so only the owner or designate can pick up the dog?
- Is it clean? There should be someone on doggy pooper scooper detail.
- Is there constant supervision? What is the dog to staff ratio?
- What type of training does the staff have? Does the staff have first aid training? If you are lucky they have also taken basic, interme-

diate or advanced dog behaviour and training classes.

- Are there rest areas to separate out stressed, tired or older dogs?
- Is there a separate introduction area for dogs that need an adjustment period before moving into the general dog population (to reduce anxiety and to reduce excitement levels)?
- Do they have the ability to separate groups based on age, size and play style?
- Are there copious amounts of clean water available at all times?
- Do they have toys and exercise equipment available (ramps, tubs of water to jump into, tunnels to run through – think agility course)?
- Are they bonded and insured?
- Are they licensed by the city?
- Do they request all necessary contact info in the event that there is an injury?
- What is the injury rate?
- Observe the dogs at the centre. Are they happy? Or are they stressed and anxious?

Remember, injuries will happen when dogs play together. Teeth will catch fur. Just as some children pinch or punch when stressed or tired, some dogs will nip or snap. The day care workers can be as diligent as they want, but sometimes things just happen. In a small to medium sized facility you don't expect more than 3 or 4 incidents in a year.

There are some clues to determine if your dog is happy at its day care and you need to pay attention to these. Are they excited about going? Are they eager and happy to enter the facility? Do they sleep well afterwards? Is it obvious they have had the chance to play hard? Keep in mind the reason why you are taking your dog to day care. Are those requirements being met? Ultimately, trust your instincts.

Now, what about puppies? Should they go to doggy day care? You guessed it - it depends. Does the facility have other puppies? Are they set up for puppies? They should have a smaller number of dogs per handler and a smaller play area. The dogs should have a greater number of quiet times during the day. And they need to be fed appropriately during the day. Finding a doggy day care that specializes in puppies or is adequately set up for puppies is challenging. If you can find one, it's a great opportunity for socialization and play.

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