

Doggy Day Care -Fun for Fido or Not?

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November 3, 2014 >> 56 Comments

When I was five or six years old my mother took me to kindergarten. I am told I cried the entire day, sitting in the corner and sobbing hysterically. Nothing anyone did assuaged me. When my mother returned to pick me up, I reportedly ran screaming across the room, grabbed onto her legs and wouldn't let go. Oh my.

I thought of that somewhat embarrassing story when a friend asked if they should put their dog into a local Doggy Care. If you've been following my blog you know my answer: "It depends." A bad doggy day care is no less than abusive and dangerous. A really good one can be a wonderful option for some dogs, but not others. I can relate to the "not others". If I'd been a dog when I was young, I would have hunkered in a corner, big-eyed and silent, or growling and snarling under a chair. But how does one know which dogs would enjoy doggy day care, and what day cares are safe, healthy places for the dogs who are good prospects?

First and foremost, it is important to remember that dogs did not evolve to play in large groups. Play between dogs is primarily between two individuals. Groups of dogs can play well together, but if you watch carefully, there are always two dogs as the primary "actors," and other dogs on the periphery, trying to join in. Thus, large groups of dogs aren't usually "playing together," they are jockeying for position, or forming smaller play groups. As Sue Sternberg pointed out in an interesting talk about play at APDT last month, play involving more than two individuals who are all participating equally requires rules, and is really only seen in one species—ours—that can write rule books. Once that happens, we call it a sport and it can only happen because we structure and organize it in a way that most animals can't.

This spring at Two Brown Dogs I changed our Puppy Head Start play experiences from free play to two puppies at a time as a result of a course I took that discussed exactly this issue. The difference was dramatic. Puppies were no longer so completely over the top that all we did was chase them around. They were able to play more appropriately, to have positive play experiences, to attend better to their owners, and to learn more than we had ever been able to teach in puppy before. Plus, those puppies coming into the next level Puppy II are far calmer and better able to learn in class than 17-24 weeks olds coming in without the Head Start experience.

I heard Sue Sternberg's presentation and posted on it from the conference. She blew me away with her examples of the problems that can arise in unsupervised, free play especially between badly mismatched dogs. Dog parks in the US are starting to experience deaths and it is almost always large dog on small dog. We certainly do not want to see this trend come to Canada or extend to daycares. The more owners know the better.

Keeping that in mind, there are four things to consider when asking if your dog is right for a doggy day care. 1) Your Dog, 2) The Staff, 3) The Environment and 4) The Other Dogs. Although 2), 3) and 4) are related, I'll take them one at a time.

YOUR DOG: The fact is that many dogs are not comfortable walking into, or spending time in a group of 20 or 30 or 50 dogs. However, like all mammals, dogs have different personalities and have had different experiences while growing up. Some dogs, I think of them as the extroverts of the dog world, love being in large groups of dogs and think it is great fun. Others are simply overwhelmed. I've seen far too many dogs whose owners are pleased because the dog comes home and is so exhausted it barely moves all night. But there's happily tired versus being exhausted from being stressed or bullied all day, and it is critical to figure out in which category your dog belongs.

Understanding your dog, what he can cope with, how he plays, how quickly he recovers from getting excited and possibly over-excited is critical. Classes help us to gain information as does the daycare evaluation but you see your dog 24/7 and know it, or should, better than anyone. Learn to read your dog's body language cues. Attend What is My Dog Saying? Take an inexpensive on-line body language course at Doggone Safe – or buy the e-book on Dog Safety also from Doggone Safe. If you take classes with me and have children or just want to learn more about canine body language but the timing of my seminar does not fit for you – let me know and I can make the e-book available to you.

Doggone Safe <http://www.doggonesafe.com/>

What is My Dog Saying? – Virden November 20th, Winnipeg December 4th, Brandon February 23rd

THE STAFF: Here is where the rubber meets the road. I would only send a dog to a facility that had a high ratio of staff to dog (perhaps one person for every 10 or 15 dogs) and highly educated staff. Each person there should be well-versed in readings dogs for signs of stress, discriminating between appropriate versus inappropriate play, and how to effectively but benevolently manage the behavior of both individual dogs and a group of dogs. That is a lot of knowledge, and I have seen far too many facilities in which the staff comes up short on all counts. There are many reasons for that, but I suspect one is that some people think all one needs to run a day care is a big empty room that has a floor that dogs can pee on. I just went to Amazon to see what is published on day cares, and most of the books that came up could be titled “Open Up a Doggy Day Care: It’s Easy!.” Ouch. The issue of good staff should be a deal breaker—ask the staff what kind of training they have had, how they handle interrupting dogs, what they look for in terms of dog-dog interactions, how they deal with emergencies, fights etc. I’d advise going to sit and watch for a few hours, without your dog. If you’re not blown away by the professionalism of the staff, I’d take a pass.

I am pretty sure Ayoka will not toot her own horn so I will. She is a Certified Professional Dog Trainer as well as being PDD’s daycare owner/operator. She has done considerable continuing education (required for recertification as a CPDT-KA) as well as additional on-line courses related to training her own and your dogs. She has an excellent eye for dog body language and uses her skills to assure inappropriate behaviours do not happen.

It is very difficult to get information about what happens in daycares or the dog park as people tend to keep unfortunate experiences close to the chest. The people that know the best are the vets because they deal with injuries. No vet is going to give you chapter and verse on different daycares and what happens in them – but I am sure you could ask your veterinarian for a recommendation or for an opinion on a daycare you have selected.

The credentials of the people that supervise your dog should be easily obtained and relevant to daycare work. Grooming classes as an example, while useful, do not necessarily provide skills necessary to observe dog at play. The credentials of the owner, again while possibly useful and extensive, are not as relevant if the owner is not actually in the space supervising the dogs.

THE FACILITY: What’s it like in there? Lots of room? Places for dogs to opt out of interaction? (Cozy corners behind half walls, places for a dog to go off by him or herself and rest?) Clean (within reason—don’t expect a Holiday Inn)? How often are dogs taken out to potty? (Do you really want your dog to learn to pee inside a room?) Is it safe? Outdoors and in? Floor not slippery? Outside have no wire points where a dog could be injured? Are there good places for the dogs to nap? Dogs need to sleep during the day; it’s not good for them to go full bore for nine hours—how does the staff handle balancing play and rest?

We have 3500 sq. feet of space. Recommended for a daycare is 100 sq. feet per dog which theoretically means PDD could take 35 dogs. Ayoka’s maximum is 20 so the dogs have ample space for R & R. The facility is cleaned twice a day – after daycare with bleach and after classes with detergent. Outdoor breaks are the first thing the dog does when it comes into the facility and close to hourly thereafter because we know sometimes they are excited when they go out and forget to pee. The outdoor area is completely fenced with 8’ chain link and the entire building is matted with anti-slip, anti-fatigue matting. Rest time is mandatory in crates with dogs that need more peace and quiet having their down time in a separate room.

THE DOGS: How are the dogs evaluated? Are owners asked to fill out a questionnaire with no other evaluation of the dog? (Thumbs down.) Is the staff cognizant of size differences? Would they let a Yorkie in with 15 medium to large-sized dogs? (Heaven help the Yorkie.) Are the dogs separated into play groups? What is the policy if a dog bullies others, or initiates a fight? Again, it helps to both interview the staff and spend some time watching the dogs. If you see several dogs ganging up on another with no response from the staff, don't even think about taking your dog there. You might try video taping the dogs for awhile, then go home and watch. Most people miss a great deal of unfriendly interactions until they can sit back and watch it on video, so consider that if you're not an expert at reading canine communication.

Owners coming to PDD complete a lengthy evaluation form **and** bring the dog to meet Ayoka in a mini-assessment. Small groups of dogs are separated by size and play style. The space can be separated with gates into 3 smaller spaces so even when small dogs are playing large dogs can also be out. This provides the opportunity for both large and small dogs to become more comfortable with one another without the risks associated with being in one space. If you have a large dog and a small dog at home and they play well together (I do) that is wonderful. But it doesn't necessarily mean it will work with all dogs and I would never put Dante at risk by assuming he could play well around all little dogs.

I've never written a booklet about doggy day care, but luckily there are some great resources available. [Kathy Sdao](#) wrote a great piece about how to select a day care (if at all) that I highly recommend. She also did a [webinar for BEN](#) about managing groups of dogs that I haven't heard but I expect is excellent. Camille Ward and Barbara Smuts have done some great [research on play](#) which I also recommend reading about. (And there's a new book out, [Canine Play Behavior](#), just translated from German by Dogwise, that summarizes all the research on dog play. It is excellent.) Robin Bennett and Susan Briggs have done so very much to make doggy day cares safer and healthier; I like one of their books so much we have it on our website: [Off Leash Dog Play](#). Robin has a new book out, [All About Doggy Day Care](#), that looks like it might be great, check it out.

What about you? Have you taken your dog to a doggy day care facility? Good experience or bad? Is there something you wished you'd known or asked before you sent your dog to day care? I have to admit that although I've worked with people in day care facilities and have had a lot of clients whose dogs went to them (included those I advised to pull out asap), I've never taken any of my dogs to one. In part that is because I'm very lucky. I have 12 acres and access to lots more at the farms of friends. My dogs get lots of exercise, in part because they work sheep and in part because they play together a lot too. But I have to admit that if I didn't have those resources I would be hesitant to take my dog to one. But then... I was the girl who cried her way out of kindergarten.