

Day Care for Dogs --- A Good Thing?

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PREFACE:

The following are guidelines, suggestions and observations from my own personal experience in owning and operating a dog day care. I also sent out a questionnaire to several day care centers across the U.S. and Canada. I asked six questions pertaining to issues raised in this article to see if other day care facilities were having similar experiences to mine. These day care facilities ranged from small centers with 12 dogs to very large facilities with 70 dogs. Several of these centers have been open since the early 1990's.

When referring to specific breeds in this article, the observations apply to mixes of these breeds as well. Of course, we are usually speculating as to what breeds are in a mixed-breed, but I have found specific behavior traits and tendencies usually give the mystery of lineage away. And, as with almost everything in life, there are exceptions to every rule! Please excuse the use of the word "owner" in this article. It was used simply for ease of understanding.

The Day Care Environment:

The dog day care is a high-stimulation, high-stress environment with humans having limited ability to correct unwanted behaviors. Positive reinforcement using rewards (verbal, food, toys, access to other dogs) seems to be the only means of compliance for "good" behaviors in this environment. Because the dog is not wearing a leash or any type of consequence/correction apparatus, if the dog does not *want* to do something you cannot physically *make* him.

The Pros & Cons:

PROS:

~Young dogs (under 2 years) can develop excellent canine social skills and manners. The enormity of the importance of a well-socialized dog cannot be under rated. It can certainly make the difference between life and death.

~ Exercise and socialization! The majority of dogs surrendered to animal shelters are adolescents who were obtained as puppies then never trained (taught basic manners), socialized appropriately or provided adequate exercise. These surrendered dogs are now physically bigger and therefore harder to control (you can't pick up that 60 pound dog like you could the 10 pound puppy). These dogs are "out of control" doing what are generally normal but unwanted canine behaviors such as jumping up, chewing, barking and digging out of boredom etc. Generally, a tired, well-exercised dog is a well-behaved dog. Clients pick up a *manageable* dog from a day at dog day care. The owner's

frustration with a wound-up dog is relieved and she can then spend relaxed time *enjoying* her dog. Possibly, keeping the dog out of a shelter.

CONS:

~ The dogs' human supervisor at the day care has no real physical control over the dogs. The supervisor has only voice control (which is mostly ineffective) and at some facilities, water and/or citronella squirt bottles, both of which can only temporarily "interrupt" unwanted behaviors. The human supervisor must be adept at using positive reinforcement methods.

~ Day care is **NOT FOR EVERY DOG** and probably even detrimental to some.

~ Because some owners believe by taking their dog to day care they are fulfilling their exercise needs, they do not take them out for walks and other exercise and socializing "adventures". Many dogs are then "well socialized" at day care but not out in the real world.

So who should attend dog day care and who should not?

Dogs that do well in day care:

~ Young dogs (under 2 years).

~ Well-socialized, easygoing adult dogs that still like to play. They don't have to want to play constantly like many of the adolescents but should enjoy playing when *they* want to.

~ In *general* (there are always exceptions), sporting breeds -- retrievers, spaniels, pointers etc... seem to do the best and gain the most from the experience. These tend to be friendly, social, happy-go-lucky types with high exercise requirements.

~ Dogs who have had some sort of basic **training** and a familiarity with basic commands.

Prior to acceptance to my day care all dogs must meet certain requirements including being spayed/neutered (by 6 months of age), vaccinated according to their veterinarian's specifications, and not toy or food protective to an unmanageable extent. I also require an evaluation. Here I meet with the dog and owner for at least 30 minutes. Instead of entering directly through the main day care room the dog enters through the back of the facility directly into the large play yard without any other dogs present. We then bring out 1-3 dogs at a time so the dog can become acquainted with the environment without being bombarded with 12-15 other dogs immediately. At this time, I go through basic commands to see where the dog is training-wise as well as have the owner leave for 5-10 minutes so that I can see if the dog becomes anxious without the owner present.

There are several basic commands that are extremely helpful in the day care environment. The "**wait**" command is one of them. There is a picket-fence enclosure *inside* the front door of my facility where the dogs must "sit" and "wait" when they first enter day care. Talk about distraction training; when your 12 best dog pals are clamoring

inside for you, sitting and waiting is not an easy task – but the reward is exceptional! Also, I have found that doorways are often a likely place for fights to occur. “Higher-ranking” dogs (generally older) will often go through the door first. When a pushy adolescent tries to push his way through, ahead of his elder, he is often reprimanded by that other dog and if he is not keen on taking that correction a scuffle may occur. Having the dogs “wait” before going through the doorways (especially to the outdoor yard) and going through as I release them with “ok” and often their name I believe has prevented potential problems. “**Leave-it**” is another command that is helpful in numerous situations especially in fight-prevention. Often I can spot a dog do what I call “tailing” a dog where they are constantly following the other dog, sideling up to them, hovering, striking dominant postures etc. Simply saying “leave-it” to a dog that understands the command has curtailed many “tailing” incidents from escalating. In relation to those dogs that “stalk” other dogs, the staff and I have also taken to “tailing” or “stalking” those dogs ourselves; simply following them around and using our bodies to walk into them and move them around without saying a word. We have found this technique to be quite useful in managing these dogs in this environment. “**Out**” or “**drop it**” is also useful. I have one regular day care dog who I always hope is the dog who ends up with the *whatever* in her mouth because she is so adept with “out.” She has consistently dropped any item from her mouth, food items included, surrounded by other dogs, on command. Several of the other day care facilities questioned also stated if dogs had a firm “sit-stay” and “quiet” command, their lives would be much less stressful!

Since many dogs know different words for different actions, it is important to have the owner write down *their* commands and descriptions on the application and for the day care supervisor to know them. We offer obedience classes and private training at our facility and I strongly urge my day care clients to (at least) attend Basic Obedience. There **is** an obvious difference between the dogs that are worked with on a consistent basis and those who are not.

Dogs that do NOT do well in day care: (once again, *there are always exceptions* but for the most part...)

~ When interviewing other day care facilities I received a variety of answers on particular breeds that tended to not do well in day care. Many seemed to have similar experiences to myself as discussed below. I also heard from several contributors that age seemed to play a bigger role on acceptance of the day care environment than even breed did. I agree with that completely. Many dogs of “difficult” breeds did quite well as young dogs (4-6 months old) but when they hit the onset of maturity (1.5-3 yrs) they were no longer good in this environment. Even dogs whose owners “did everything right” in terms of socializing and training often had problems once they reached this age.

~ Herding breeds. These dogs need specific, **structured** activity. These dogs tend to spend the majority of their time at day care trying to control the other dogs and their activities. Some herders may also have a tendency to be overly toy protective in day care. In general, there is usually just too much chaos in this environment for the herding dog to deal with.

~ Dogs who have high-arousal tendencies. Pit-bulls, rottweilers, boxers, “Bully” breeds and some terriers (and mixes thereof), seem to be the most often seen examples of this type of dog. These are the dogs that go after any thing in their path when there is any type of disruption in the environment, namely entrances or exits of any other dog or human. Some of these dogs can do perfectly fine if removed (crated or put in another room) when someone new comes into the environment. I have also had success with these dogs if they know (and follow *consistently*) a “leave it” command. If not removed or strictly voice-controlled, they can get “amped” and the result is usually high-arousal, re-directed aggression towards the dog closest to them. You do not want these dogs in this environment unless you have an experienced staff (see side bar article “*Tips For a Successful Day Care*”)

~Dogs with toy or food guarding tendencies.

~ Un-neutered males or females. Or some males who were neutered late, usually after maturity, which varies from breed to breed and dog to dog but is usually somewhere between 2 and 4 years old. These dogs will sometimes tend to still behave like un-neutered males and have trouble or start trouble with other males, whether the other dog is neutered or not.

~ Dogs with **true** separation anxiety. Many owners with these dogs think the solution is to have them with other people and dogs when the owner cannot be around. This doesn’t work. The dog is usually attached to *that specific person* and still displays severe anxiety in day care (panting, pacing, whining...). These dogs cannot be consoled or distracted by other people or dogs; they seem blind to the activities around them and are usually focused on finding an escape route.

~ Some older dogs. Many older dogs do really well in day care. They are relaxed, play games with the other dogs and have fun. These dogs are a much needed asset in regards to fairly and appropriately managing younger dogs and teaching them good dog skills. For some older dogs however, it is just too stressful an environment. A separate space/room should be provided for these dogs to get away from the teenagers for a while and if they have their relaxation space they often do really well. The question here is does this particular dog *enjoy* this environment or is he here simply to relieve the owner’s guilt?

Tips for a successful day care environment:

~ A variety of ages. A play group with only 10 month olds would be a disaster. Older, “higher-ranking” dogs (who are well-socialized and *fair*) are needed to dole out corrections when necessary. They do a much better job of effectively and appropriately reprimanding than any human I’ve ever seen.

~ A variety of males and females. The only serious fights I have seen this environment have always been between a male and a male or a female and a female. Scuffles and fights generally occur between dogs close in status (age, size, and sex) or a persistent lower-ranking dog who is constantly testing (and irritating!) a higher-ranking dog and will not back down when corrected. From my experience, males tend to do a lot more “posturing” and females tend to have more fights where actual wounds occur. The males look like they will have more fights but the females get right to it. I have also found that more often older males tend to correct younger males and older females tend to correct younger females.

~ Some dogs need a forced rest. Some dogs simply will not stop and will become tired, cranky (less tolerant of others) and sick unless crated for a nap. It is a huge plus for a day care dog to be comfortable and happy in a crate or kennel, thereby allowing him to take stress-free breaks. Almost all of the day care facilities polled (mine included) used “time-outs” of various lengths (depending on the dog) to calm dogs down and to curb unwanted behaviors. I do not believe it is healthy or in the dog’s best interest for him to be running for 10+ hours straight. Owners should ask that their young dog be given rest periods. Especially dogs under 18 months of age who are often not very good at regulating their own activity.

~ For most dogs, attending day care 2 or 3 days a week is a maximum. More than 2 or 3 days is simply too much stimulation for most dogs. Varying the dog’s activities with day care and easy leashed walks or shorter off-leash exercising on alternating days seems ideal for the majority of dogs. I have also found that many dogs who do attend day care 5 days/week are fine in the day care but often not well socialized to outside environments. So, even those owners who thought they were doing the “right thing” by having their dog attend day care everyday actually did the dog a disservice but not socializing him to various environments/activities/adventures.

~ **A well-educated staff!** It is extremely important to have a staff that is knowledgeable in dog behavior, *especially* in reading canine body language. Dog play can sometimes look extreme, even violent, to people who are not familiar with normal dog behavior; I’ve seen people intervene at all the wrong moments. I have seen people reprimand, even “correct” an older, higher-ranking dog from disciplining a younger (usually adolescent), lower-ranking dog thereby confusing *both* dogs. I have seen *very few* actual “fights” where blood has been drawn but I have seen hundreds of episodes of normal canine spats or what I like to refer to as a dog getting “told off” by another dog for his inappropriate or rude behavior. It is imperative that the staff can tell the difference between normal play and inappropriate (or potentially dangerous) canine behaviors. It is simply not enough just to have a “love of dogs”; the staff must *understand* them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Danette Johnston is a Licensed Veterinary Technician in the state of WA and a Certified Pet Dog Trainer. She has been training (dogs and people!) working in animal hospitals and shelters for the past 15 years, owning and operating her own dog training facility and

day care center, **dog's day out**, for the past 10 years. Danette is a licensed Canine Good Citizen evaluator for the AKC and worked previously as a Delta Society Pet Partner's (animal-assisted therapy) Instructor and Team. Danette currently shares her home with two cats, one mixed-breed "difficult" dog, a preschooler and an extremely tolerant husband.

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