

Quality Daycare for Your Dog

Nine simple rules for finding the best doggie daycare in your area.

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Do late nights at work or a packed family schedule leave you with a nagging sense that you're shortchanging your dog? If so, maybe it's time to act. Dogs are deeply social animals that crave companionship. Yes, a second dog or a cat may ease his loneliness. But if expanding your animal family isn't realistic, consider doggie daycare. Your dog will get to romp with playmates, and he'll come home relaxed and happy.

The good news is these businesses have exploded in numbers, so finding one shouldn't be difficult. The bad news is these businesses have exploded in numbers, so finding quality care can be a challenge.

Put on your detective hat and visit a doggie daycare. Be nosy and consider the following questions. After all, these people will care for something very precious — your dog.

1. Does the staff supervise group play at all times? A person who sits in front of a video monitor in another room doesn't count. Make sure there is at least one staff member supervising play per every six dogs, advises September Morn, a certified dog trainer and author of "Training Your Labrador Retriever" (Barrons 2000). If the dogs-to-staff ratio is any higher than that, and a fight breaks out from overexcitement (which happens among the nicest of dogs), all the dogs might easily jump into the fray. Dogs can be seriously injured in just a few moments if there aren't enough humans on the scene to separate and calm them.
2. Does the facility have a quiet-play or crate area? Most dogs, especially older dogs, should not remain in playgroups all day long. Talk to the attendants if you think your dog needs some alone time. A quality facility will do whatever it can to increase your dog's comfort.
3. Do Mr. and Mrs. Clean work here? Make sure the place smells clean, but not of heavy disinfectant, Morn says. If it's clean-smelling, that means the staff is paying attention to when the [caged] dogs need a potty break and also that they're immediately cleaning up any accidents. But if it smells strongly of disinfectant, that can mean they let it go until the place is full of potty accidents then clean it all up and douse it with disinfectant. Also, a strong smell of disinfectant or cleaning solution means it hasn't been rinsed off or dried properly and the dogs will be getting those chemicals on their feet, breathing it and even ingesting it — all of which is unhealthy.
4. Do they remove training collars in the play area? Hazardous collars include choke or slip collars, which can present a choking danger if the collar gets caught during play. It's not unusual for daycares to remove all collars or to provide ones with safety releases.
5. What are your general impressions of the facility? Do outside play areas contain shade and ample clean drinking water? If the facility has equipment such as agility ramps, do they appear well-maintained and safe? The play area shouldn't contain any movable toys, which dogs might fight over.

Next Step: Are the attendants in control of the dogs?