

COUNTRY LIVING

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YOU & YOUR PET

BY TONI GARDNER

Dogs are social beings. They need company. Well-socialized pets—dogs that respect and interact comfortably with people as well as other dogs—are happy and responsive. But because today's families tend to spend less and less time at home, their gregarious canine companions sometimes miss out on the socializing they crave. More often than not, a chewed-on slipper or a mess on the floor signals a lack of social stimuli.

Boredom-busting strategies that may soothe the sensitive or older pet include leaving toys and treats out or scheduling midday walks with a pet sitter. Some dogs,



Above: At dog day-care centers, individual attention makes for a fun, fulfilling day that might otherwise be boring and lonely. Here, Rebecca Bisgyer of Dog-ma Daycare for Dogs, in Washington, D.C., spends some one-on-one time with a client. Below: Active dogs thrive on games, either singly (left) or in groups (right).

DAY CARE for DOGS

The ultimate in surrogate pet parenthood can satisfy your pet's social needs for play and exercise in the company of its peers

however, simply can't play solitaire. In order to develop into friendly companions, young animals need extended interactive playtime. Thus the ultimate in surrogate pet parenthood—day-care facilities for dogs—is quickly becoming a solution.

Dog day care got its start in 1987, when Joe Sporn, then a pre-vet student and dog groomer in New York City, founded what would become the Yuppie Puppy in his basement by helping out his neighbors with their pets. Sporn's example quietly gathered force for a few years until the San Francisco SPCA opened its Doggy Daycare Center in 1994. It began as a projected five-year pilot program and has since become a worldwide model.

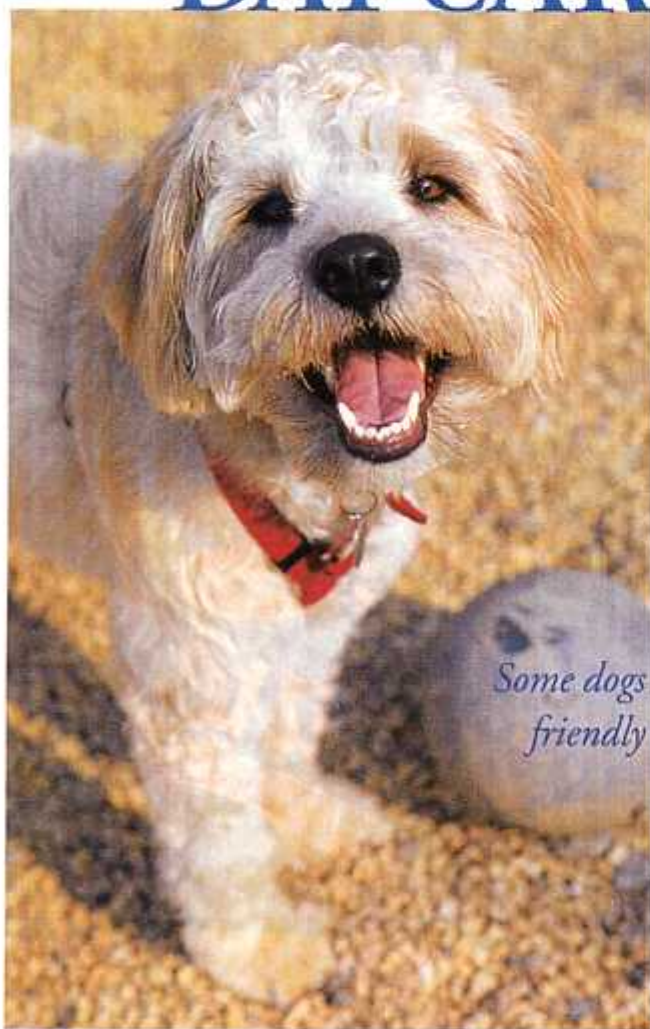
The concept behind dog day care is simple: Dogs meet, greet,

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and play the day away. Animal behaviorist and trainer John Bohnenkamp, of Perfect Paws, in San Francisco, believes that day care for dogs provides a beneficial environment when "the dogs are closely supervised. Dogs need someone to create activities," Bohnenkamp says, "and manage any potential problems that may arise, like possessiveness over toys."

Rebecca Bisgyer, owner of Dog-ma Daycare for Dogs, in Washington, D.C., begins each day with a group activity

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intended to establish her position as the pack leader. Although dogs at Bisgyer's facility are prescreened for temperament before being accepted, this routine morning exercise helps to keep dominance conflicts among the pets to a minimum. Afterward, dogs break off into impromptu smaller groups for continued play. Troublemakers receive "time-outs" in specially designated crates. And all dogs at Dog-ma can have their own downtime in specified napping areas.

With 30-minute pet-sitter visits running in the \$12-\$20 range around the country, the \$15-\$25 price tag for a full day of dog day care would make it seem like a virtual bargain. But, when tallied at \$5,000 a year, the amount tops my children's annual parochial-school tuition, even considering the fact that the dogs spend more hours in day care than the kids do at school. Many centers do, however, accept dogs part time (the hourly fee may be higher), and some also offer boarding.

Most dog day-care centers require an interview with both you and your dog. This is the time to examine the entire facility and get a feel for the amount of attention your dog will receive. Bisgyer gives the fol-



Supervised interaction is the foremost benefit of dog day care. As gregarious canines share toys and make friends, they also learn to respect the staff. If your pet isn't ready for the rigors of a regular schedule, part-time programs are available.

your breed, and how they would interact with your dog on an individual level.

During the interview, check out the other dogs as well. Do they seem to be suitable playmates for your canine pal? Will your dog be overwhelmed? If so, how would the center ease your dog into the routine? Should your pet not be accepted into a program because of a behav-


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lowing tips: Rules, and all age and health requirements, should be clearly posted. A mission statement is a good sign; extreme cleanliness, plenty of water, and an adequate dog-to-human ratio are even better. The space should not be overly noisy—that would be stressful to any dog. Try to find out how much the caretakers know about dog behavior and psychology, what their methods of discipline are, what they know about

ior or attitude problem, by all means enroll in an obedience class immediately.

Once dogs familiarize themselves with a program, Bisgyer explains, it's easy to tell whether they are enjoying it. "For example, your dog should look forward to getting into the car in the morning to go to 'school.'"

Jon Kelliher, manager of the San Francisco SPCA's Doggy Daycare Center, reports that when one of his clients' dogs sees the dog lunch bag come out of the breakfast cabinet at home on Friday mornings (for her once-a-week attendance), "the dog goes absolutely nuts with excitement." At night, dogs should be thoroughly and blissfully exhausted.

Some pet owners may consider the notion of dog day care extravagant; others will view it as part of responsible pet ownership. But wherever or however you socialize your dog—long afternoon walks, Frisbee chasing in the park, or action-packed dog day care—it can only benefit both you and your pet. No matter how the days play out, there are always the evenings to spend together. 



TO LEARN MORE

There is currently no national organization for dog day-care centers, but you can access specific sites on the Web. Also, check local newspapers and ask your veterinarian, trainer, or animal shelter for recommendations. Here are some Web sites worth consulting: www.sfspca.org/doggydaycare.html, www.perfectpaws.com, and www.dog-ma.com, owned by Rebecca Bisgyer (left).

—T.G.