

HILL RAG

JULY 2003





Dogs at PLAY at Dog-Ma

MY LIFE AS A DOG-MA

Tips from five years of daycare and boarding bliss

by REBECCA BISGYER

The wonderful world of pet services continues to astound us with its offerings, both strange (pet psychics; \$2,000 Gucci dog beds) and wonderful (advances in veterinary medicine, pet adoption services, and greater choices in dog care options.) One thing I've learned in five years since opening Dog-ma, Washington's first group play, daycare and boarding facility, is that dog owners can do their pets a great service by considering both their pet's needs—as well as their own needs—when deciding what kind of dog care to choose. Your personal considerations might be convenience, cost, location, and your schedule. However, you also need to consider what kind of care will most benefit your dog, and why. Because Dog-ma was the first center of its kind here, we had a great opportunity to educate dog owners on the benefits of all-day personalized care for daycare and boarding. As a result, I believe we've also created the definitive daycare blueprint, sound policies, and standards for excellent, loving care that have also benefited more recent market entrants.

All-day, group play for daycare and boarding can be wonderful for pooches of all ages, sizes, and breeds. It's not, however, for every dog. But time and time again, owners have told me that services like ours have made a fabulous difference in their life, their dogs' life, and their human/canine bond. Here's what to consider:

Your Dog's Age, Energy Level, Health, and Behavior

Without exception, healthy puppies, adolescent and adult active dogs need lots of exercise and attention. They also benefit greatly from daily socialization with humans and other canines, as well as regular, consistent positive behavioral reinforcement. Conversely, these same dogs can wreak havoc in various ways if bored, lonely, or unattended for long periods of time—and, since most of us work, that is generally the case! Dealing with an in-

satiable ball of canine energy or the aftermath of boredom or anxiety-related behaviors can be a challenge, especially after a busy workday.

Many people crate train their dogs as puppies, but confinement should not be a permanent option for an adult dog and shouldn't be used for more than 4 hours at a stretch. Consider providing your dog some kind of daytime care, to at least allow it to

relieve itself mid-day. While a short mid-day walk is a good start, this may not be enough exercise for most active dogs, which need to run, swim, or actively play with other dogs to get the activity levels they need.

These healthy dogs are often ideal candidates for a group play setting, such as daycare's 12 hours of daily activity. If you've had problems behaviorally or feel guilty leaving your dog alone for hours or days when you work or travel, imagine the impact that all-day exercise, companionship, and positive behavioral reinforcement could have on your dog. There is a cost, but the value of returning home to an anxiety-free, calm dog cannot be measured. And, depending on frequency of use, all day group care is often only a few dollars more per day than one 15-minute walk, and overnight boarding not much more than pet sitting visits required while you're away.

But what if your dog is more sedentary? Or older? Or overweight? While older dogs will need less exercise, many still benefit greatly from the constant love, personal attention, and enjoyable routine of a group facility during the day or when you travel—not to mention the benefits of bathroom accessibility! At Dog-ma, our office is the area for the less active dogs...it has soft beds and toys, and, most importantly, me or the manager doting on our doddlers.

As far as extra weight (and its relationship to being sedentary) I cannot stress the importance of sensible activity and daily exercise. About 30% of dogs are overweight, often leading to unfortunate and unnecessary health problems and sometimes a shorter lifespan. At Dog-ma, we've found that dogs lose weight consistently when heavy, and we are careful to regulate activity at first to avoid any problems. And, while dogs become much more active, we still guarantee they'll be sleepy and calm when they get home!

Health conditions must be considered carefully prior to using a group play facility. Dogs that feel vulnerable for physical reasons due to infirmity, disability, or chronic health conditions may not be comfortable interacting with a group of dogs, possibly attracting unwanted attention, and may become defensive to compensate. Chronic conditions like arthritis should be discussed with your vet and the



REBECCA BISGIER IN HER OFFICE AT DOG-MA

care provider so a routine is created to avoid exacerbating any injuries or conditions. Of course, all dogs must be annually vaccinated and have a full veterinary checkup prior to attending any group play facility, to avoid exposure to illness or contagion. Finally, always inform your care provider if your dog seems ill, is acting strangely, or has eaten something it shouldn't have. The list of items dogs have eaten prior to arriving at Dog-ma and subsequently, uh, expelled, while in our care is long...and bizarre. Okay, here's just a few: plastic bread bags, dish towels, half a bath towel, pantyhose (followed thereafter by knee high stockings) tube socks, booties, and 10 rubber caps off the feet of an owner's living room furniture. It sounds amusing, but it can be dangerous...and then we need to get them to the vet to make sure it's not.

Socialization Skills

Think about your dog's personality and background. Has it ever interacted with other dogs? How many and how often? If your mature dog has no or limited experience with other dogs, all day group-play might be overwhelming. To test this, start with controlled, brief visits to a dog park and watch for problem signals:

Fearful reactions: running away or hiding

Dominant behaviors: mounting, charging, bullying; toy possessiveness: limping or snarling over toys; agitated, wild barking at play; snarling or snapping when approached.

If your dog has any histo-

ry of dog or people-related aggression, forgo a group facility. Also, consider a behavior modification program with a professional trainer or behaviorist. It's worth trying to help your dog change in order to have more options available—and less stress regarding potential problem situations.

Separation Anxiety

Does your dog show signs of anxiety when alone, resulting in destructive behavior, escape attempts, lapses in housetraining (or nasty notes from your neighbors, complaining about barking)? If so, pick a service that gives your dog as much daily companionship as possible. Daycare centers are a good choice for day or overnight care if your dog likes, or is reasonably comfortable—even benignly apathetic—around other dogs. The hours of human contact can relieve the symptoms and behaviors of anxiety and have a very positive affect on both of your lives. One client placed her anxious dog at Dog-ma after he had systematically destroyed her families' antiques while alone. The fact that he acclimated to daycare eliminated the problem and actually prevented the owner from giving up her pet.

Breed Traits

What was your dog bred to do? Dogs have remarkably different personalities and backgrounds, but breed can definitely influence behavior in different environments, and in a pack, these behavioral traits can become more pronounced. If your dog was bred to fight dogs (even if

they never personally have) a group facility is not recommended. Conversely, working dogs like collies or pointers need both exercise and problem solving, and usually are a perfect fit for a daycare center.

The Final Part(s)

If your dog isn't neutered or spayed after six months of age, and you don't plan to alter them, please don't contact a group play facility for boarding or daycare. In addition to the obvious difficulty controlling mating with intact dogs, one intact male or female can significantly alter the balance of a pack, creating the potential for aggression, dominance, and behaviors the pack will find repetitive and annoying. Constant indoor marking by intact males in a group setting is a given—even if your dog doesn't do this at home. Please don't ask for exceptions to this policy, either...it's not safe and no reputable care provider would ever consider it. How about neutering or spaying your dog instead, thereby helping reduce the tragic pet overpopulation problem (yes, even for purebred dogs) as well as giving your dog access to the benefits of group play!

Finally, as a care provider, I urge you to be very forthcoming with any pet service regarding your dog's personality, history, and behavior. Any reputable group facility should require a written application, ask you lots of questions about your dog, and conduct an evaluation, and you should make sure it's thorough. At Dog-ma, we never would want to force your best friend into a situation that might risk both safety and comfort—we want dogs to love it here! Ultimately, the right care choice can have a positive impact on your pet's behavior, personality, and, by extension, a positive influence on your relationship with your dog.

Rebecca Bisgier owns Dog-ma Daycare for Dogs, Wash DC's only indoor/outdoor doggy daycare and boarding facility, located on Capitol Hill. 202-543-7805; www.dog-ma.com.