

Is Doggy Day Camp Right for Your Pet?

By Jennifer Kratzer

Programs that bring dogs together to play and socialize are popping up everywhere. Whether called day camp, play group or some other name, they can provide exercise and socialization for your dog, while offering you peace of mind and freedom from guilt. But how do you know if day camp is right for your dog and, with no government certification process, how do you know if a program is of good quality?

At Best Friends, we have been running doggy day camp programs since 1997. We suggest the following guidelines to anyone thinking about camp for their family pet:

Consider Whether It Will Benefit Your Dog

In most cases, the answer is yes. Day camp is a great choice for high-energy dogs who need lots of daily exercise, as well as for puppies and young dogs who demand frequent interaction.

At the other end of the spectrum, overweight dogs and older dogs suffering from arthritis can also benefit because the excitement around them gets them up and moving. (Be sure to check with your veterinarian first.)

Day camp can also be very beneficial for a dog who becomes anxious when left home alone and who expresses his discomfort with problem behaviors like howling, damaging furnishings or soiling in the house. In addition, shy dogs who can gain confidence around other canines. However, daycamp won't help with a dog suffering from serious separation anxiety or fear issues; you'll need to seek assistance from a professional trainer before considering day camp for these pets.

Assess Whether Your Dog Will Fit In

Not every dog can or should attend camp but, contrary to popular belief, size and breed really aren't a factor. At Best Friends, we screen every candidate to assess temperament and ability to participate in group play. It's personality that determines whether a dog is a good candidate for camp.

The best candidates are friendly, well-adjusted dogs that are comfortable around both people and other dogs. On the other hand, a dog that is aggressive or has a history of biting should not participate in day camp. A fearful dog generally isn't a good candidate either, since he may nip out of fear. It isn't necessary that your dog be trained, although dogs that have attended group classes often adjust to group play more readily than those who have never been socialized.

Investigate Several Programs Before Deciding

Selecting a program has much in common with choosing a child care program. Whether you begin with a friend's recommendation or by leafing through the yellow pages, always visit any program you are considering and observe it in action.

Things to watch for and questions to ask:

SAFETY: Is the facility clean and safe? Are the toys and equipment sturdy and appropriate for dogs? Are the dogs supervised at all times?

STAFFING: Are the staff members trained? Do they interact with the dogs or sit and watch? Do they appear to have control of the dogs in their care?

SPACE: Do the dogs have enough space to run about and play? Is there a designated area for isolating dogs that become overly excited and need a 'time out'? Is there a separate play area for small dogs so they socialize without being trampled by the big guys?



HEALTH: Are vaccinations and a fecal test required for all dogs in the group? Is there a spay-neuter requirement?

SCREENING: Is every dog screened for temperament before joining the group? Is the new camper introduced to the pack gradually to avoid problems? What happens if a dog attacks another in camp?

As you observe the camp in action, don't be surprised to see rough-and-tumble action including jumping, mouthing and growling. To the untrained eye, it can be hard to distinguish between fighting and normal dog play, which is why it is essential that the dogs be supervised by trained staff.

Getting Started

If you like what you see, make an appointment to have your pet 'interviewed'. Be honest in answering all questions about temperament and behavior; if you aren't, you could be putting your dog, another pet or even a staff member at risk of serious injury.

Once your pet is accepted into the program, it's very important to be sure that your dog attends regularly so he builds and maintains friendships with the other dogs in the group. That means two to three times weekly for the first few weeks; then at least once a week after he has settled in. Otherwise, he will spend most of each session getting reacquainted with the group!

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