



DOG DAYS: *New Twists in Pet Care*

Pet pampering has reached new levels, as dog “day-care” employees sleep alongside canines and read the animals bedtime stories. The dog day-care trend has meant that traditional, no-frills kennels must now find new ways to throw demanding pet owners a bone.

By Susan Lorimor, Associate Editor

Forget sleeping behind wire grates on cement floors: When Kasha, Malinka and Mischka—a trio of Malteses—were boarded while their owners went out of town, they spent their days snuggling on a miniature bed that had an old-fashioned red metal frame. They watched cartoon movies on a TV hanging in their 7-ft. by 7-ft. “regency suite” at Best Friends Pet Care in Prairie View, Ill. Best Friends is a national chain that offers doggie “day camp”—what other pet-care providers call day care—and overnight boarding. The Malteses’ owners paid \$66 per night for the three canines to stay in the facility’s top-of-the-line room. It has a 7-ft. by 12-ft. outdoor “patio,” or run.

A rapidly growing pack of facilities and chains like Best Friends, offering pampered pet care and boarding, is moving in on the territory of traditional kennels. Many of the operators offer dog day care.

American Boarding Kennels Association (ABKA) now recognizes day-care operators as full association members with voting privileges. Previously, day-care operators could be auxiliary members only—but then the number of day-care operators grew to be nothing to bark at. ABKA day-care section chair Susan Briggs says that in 1999, as she and her partners were starting their dog day care, Urban Tails, in Houston, she joined an Internet group of about 200 aspiring and established dog day-care operators. Today, the group numbers more than 2,000 members.

On the other hand, there are about 10,000 kennels in the United States. Kennels typically charge \$20 to \$25 a night to board a dog.

Dog day cares charge as much as \$75 a night to board a canine. Then there are the extra costs: \$4.50 for your dog to watch a cartoon movie on a big-



(ABOVE) BEST FRIENDS PET CARE

PARADISE RANCH

screen TV, \$6 for a person to read your dog a bedtime story, \$20 for a 15-min. dog massage and up to \$65 to pick up your dog in a Mercedes and take it 30 miles to day care.

Day-care rates for watching your pet during the day range from \$25 to \$35; this option often appeals to pet owners who fear their dogs would otherwise get lonely at home. Some day cares offer discounted rates for watching multiple pets from one family or for buying a 10- or 20-day pass. Most day cares and kennels offer washing and grooming for a fee.

New Dogs, New Tricks. According to American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, pet owners will spend \$2.7 billion on boarding and grooming this year. Kennel operators are feeling the bite of the dog day-care trend and are garnering less of that chuck wagon, but they are not taking it lying down. Many now offer amenities such as spa grooming treatments—think spa baths—and canine agility courses. Reflecting the influence of the day-care brand of dog care, some kennels allow dogs to play in groups—an option that was traditionally a no-no. Others remain focused on one-

on-one playtime with a kennel employee.

“The old-timers in the kennel-boarding industry cringe when they hear the [term] ‘day care,’ ” says ABKA Executive Director James Krack. He adds that it was considered unethical to allow animals from different pet-owning families to play together. “The argument was that [the dogs] would get into fights.”

But as dog parks grew in popularity and number over the past decade, people began to allow their dogs to romp off-leash with other canines. Now, apparently, people want that intermingling to extend to dog-care facilities. And thanks to the canine pampering that takes place in dog day cares, pet owners expect other treats from kennels.

“What a lot of people want is the gimmick stuff,” says Francine Barnes, who runs Carriage Hill Kennels in Glenview, Ill., with her brother, Chris Cocallas.

Dog-care providers like Joe Giannini, co-owner of Urban Out Sitters in Chicago, however, don’t see certain extras as gimmicks but as perks dogs deserve. “In this day and age, we care for our dogs like our children,” Giannini says. “I don’t put a lesser mark on a dog or a child. To me, they’re equal.”

Get the Scoop. If you’re deciding to board your dog at a day care or a kennel, first tour the facilities in which you’re interested. Giannini suggests visiting at least three. Look for a dog day care or kennel that will take you on a tour anytime, even if you drop by unexpectedly. If the operators refuse you a tour or say you need to make an appointment first, they could be keeping you from getting an accurate picture of the facility.

“If they say, ‘We do [tours] after 7 p.m. and on weekends,’ it’s because all the dogs are gone [from the play area at that time],” Giannini says.

In that situation, you cannot see how staff members interact with or treat the animals.

We put Giannini’s advice to the test at Pooch Chicago, which offers day care and boarding. The facility’s owner, Robin Tome, would not give Consumers Digest a tour on a weekday afternoon because she said a new person in the dog play area would distract the animals.

When on a tour, ask how long staffers have worked in the industry. Ask about their training. Although ABKA offers certification for day-care and kennel employees, the association does not require ABKA-member-facility employees to be certified. The staff of Best Friends completes a company training program. At Carriage Hill Kennels, Barnes says she trains employees herself.

Before a day care takes you on as a client, it may want to do temperament testing on your dog to assess whether the canine is timid or aggressive. Timid canines may have trouble mixing into a *play group*, and some operators will not take pit bulls or mixes of the breed out of fear that the dogs are too aggressive. In a similar vein, at his day care, Giannini has refused dogs because they were not neutered.

As for regulations, some municipalities and states license and inspect pet-care facilities. Colorado, for example, checks to make sure that facilities meet minimum standards for humane care, cooling, sanitation, ventilation, and methods of operation and record keeping.

Security: An Owner’s Best Friend. Some day cares allow dogs to sleep “cage-free” in their own room, as the Malteses at Best Friends did. To add fur-



ther to the at-home feel, private residents have begun to offer dog day care in their homes. However, unless a city has zoned the resident's home for business use, a business cannot be run in it. The city could ultimately come in and shut down the day care.

When you check out a day care or kennel, make sure the gaps in chain link fencing surrounding the cage where your dog will sleep are small enough so that your dog's tags will not get caught in them. To avoid the entanglement, some kennels replace the dog's collar with one the facility supplies.

Ensure that the top of the enclosure and the attached run—a contained area where dogs go to exercise—is covered with fencing. Otherwise, dogs that climb or jump may get out of the area.

The area where your dog will sleep should be large enough so that the animal can stand, stretch and turn around.

Dog trainer Lisa Mullinax of 4 Paws University in Sacramento, Calif., offers a painful reminder of why it's important to make sure there are no exposed wires in the cage: Mullinax's friend left a dog at a boarding facility, and the dog chewed on an exposed electrical wire inside the cage and was killed.

Also, ensure there are at least two secure doors between the off-lead space your dog will be in and any outside area. Otherwise, there is a greater risk that your dog will get out, posing problems for your dog and for other animals at the facility. Animal-law attorney Amy Breyer of Chicago helped her client Mary Ann Anzalone win the right to sue for damages, including pain and suffering, after Anzalone's cat, Blackie, died while being boarded at a vet's clinic.

Breyer says Anzalone boarded her cats with a local veterinarian and that one day, a veterinary technician took the cats out of their cage in one room so they could get exercise. Simultaneously, a rottweiler got out of the dog room and went into the cat room.

"It just literally ripped [Blackie] to death," says Breyer.

Illinois' Cook County Circuit Court had dismissed Anzalone's claim for "intentional infliction of emotional distress," but an appellate court reversed the decision, allowing Anzalone to sue for damages based on the cat's sentimental



value to her rather than the cat's fair market value. Now Anzalone will seek as much as \$50,000 in damages in a court date this fall.

Breyer says she is not aware of any waiver Anzalone signed that would have dismissed the vet clinic from liability in case of an injury. In court, Breyer claimed the cat's death was the result of negligence on the part of the veterinarian and the vet clinic.

Cleanliness and Injuries. Cages should be cleaned during the day when the dog is in its run or in a play group. Many facilities use a power washer to clean concrete surfaces with a solution of bleach and water. ABKA notes that such a solution helps guard against parvovirus, a serious intestinal disease dogs can contract from contaminated surfaces.

Additionally, ABKA advises that dogs left at a day care or kennel be immunized against rabies, distemper, hepatitis, leptospirosis, parainfluenza, parvo (DHLPP) and bordatella, also called kennel cough. Day cares and kennels will not take dogs that do not have proof of vaccination for rabies, distemper and bordatella.

Ask the day care or kennel operators if a veterinarian is on-call and if your dog's vet will be used in an emergency. Most facilities will call on your pet's vet unless the vet's office is several miles away.

At a facility that allows play groups, dogs need to be separated into groups by size and play style. In poorly matched groups, larger dogs have been known to severely injure smaller ones.

Briggs, of Urban Tails, says Yorkies, for example, "are small and fluffy like rodents," and can trigger a larger dog's attack drive.

Dog day cares, which allow pets to be in play groups several hours a day, should have one person watching 10 to 15 large, active dogs and one person per a maximum of 20 smaller, less-active dogs, according to the experts with whom Consumers Digest spoke.

Briggs says that before you board your dog at a day care, you should pay to leave it at facility during the day on two separate occasions to see how the canine fits into the new environment.

Some dogs, used to sleeping much of the day at home while you are at work, may be better suited to boarding at a kennel than a day care. "It's just like [with] your kids," Briggs says. "Some are better at an active camp."

According to ABKA and other dog experts, day cares should have limits as to how many animals they take on a given day. There should be enough play space for a dog to break into a run, with an average of about 75 sq. ft. of space per dog, says ABKA.

Employees should watch your dog

closely enough to tell you, for example, how your pet got the scratches on its nose when playing, Briggs says. Don't assume your dog will sit in a corner and not roughhouse with others.

"If you're going to put a dog in a social environment, it's going to get bumps and scratches," Briggs says. "[People] need to be tolerant of that."

Of course, if a dog gets a severe injury, that's another story. Keep in mind that many day care and kennel operators will have you sign an agreement that releases them from liability if your dog is injured during its stay.

If your dog does get injured, make sure it received proper vet care, and then take photos of the animal's injury and find the contract or waiver you signed, says Breyer, the animal-law lawyer.

"If you're going to put a dog in a social environment, it's going to get bumps and scratches," says Susan Briggs of Houston's Urban Tails.

See if the facility will let you look at the area where your dog was boarded or where it sustained the injury. Take pictures of the area.

"Accidents can happen anytime—the question is, 'How do you deal with it [should] it happen?'" Breyer says.

A lawyer can tell you whether you have grounds to sue the day care or kennel and its operators.

Pet owners do sign the waiver of liability—and that is what lawyers for the day care and kennel operators will argue in court, Breyer says.

But, she adds, pet owners need to examine the waiver closely to determine if they are also releasing day care and kennel operators from responsibility in instances of negligence. A legal battle can be costly and it can be difficult to convince the court you should receive damages based on a pet's value to you rather than the pet's fair market value.

You could find relief in lodging a complaint about a facility. If the facility is an ABKA member, you can fill out a complaint form with the association, and the matter will be investigated. To provide peace of mind for owners who leave their canines at a dog day care or kennel, some facilities use Web cams to

display on the Internet images of the dogs at play.

Best Friends charges a fee of \$5 per boarded dog for enrollment in its Healthy Pet Program. The fee ensures that health problems that arise at a Best Friends facility are covered. The maximum limit of coverage for veterinary treatment is \$500.

"We call it a warranty," says Young, Best Friends' manager in Prairie View.

Excluded from Healthy Pet Program coverage are pre-existing conditions, vaccinations, and treatment for kennel cough and injuries that result from boarding multiple pets from the same family in one enclosure.

An existing pet-insurance policy may cover the dogs' vet bills. Pets Best insurance offers such policies, covering as much as \$7,500 worth of treatment for bites, scratches and major injuries sustained during a dog's day care

or a kennel stay, according to customer service reps. Coverage kicks in after a deductible of \$75 or \$200 has been met.

Will Your Dog Miss You? Most day care and kennel operators allow pet owners to bring in the dog's own food. Some operators even allow owners to bring in the dog's bed and toys out of a belief that familiar items can comfort a canine. Others don't believe that the benefits of such a practice outweigh the risks.

About 10 years ago, Barnes, of Carriage Hill Kennels, stopped allowing owners to leave their dog's belongings (aside from edible chews) with the dog in the cage. Barnes changed the rules after one canine ripped up an expensive dog bed. Barnes is afraid dogs will choke on the things they tear apart. Plus, Barnes says that accidents can happen during an overnight stay and that beds and other cloth objects left in a cage will hold urine—and odors.

Some day cares encourage dog owners to leave a T-shirt that bears the owner's scent. The T-shirt is intended to ease the dog's "separation anxiety" when it is left without its owner. Dogs long for the familiar, says veterinarian and pet behaviorist Barbara Simpson,

clinical associate professor at North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine, who advocates leaving something behind for your dog. However, there's no way to tell which emotions canines can experience, Simpson says.

Margaret Fulghum, manager of Pooch Chicago, says she can attest to separation anxiety on the part of owners. "They will call a lot to check on the dogs," she says.

Fulghum says one owner called from the airport to check on her Pomeranian, Tiny, before the owner had even left town. "I literally had to talk her into getting on the airplane," she says.

When you do leave your dog, don't be overly emotional—dogs sense from a human's emotions when something is awry and can get anxious, notes ABKA. Tell kennel operators if your dog is prone to anxiety so that it can be kept in a calmer area with less barking.

The Return Home. When you get back into town, ask whether your dog adapted well to the environment or if it displayed unusual behavior or required special handling. As part of its standard procedure, Best Friends keeps a "report card" of your dog during its stay; handlers mark off how well the dog ate and the condition of its stool and urine.

Know that after you take your dog home, it is normal for the animal to sleep more than usual for a few days, because its sleep pattern may have been knocked off kilter by other barking dogs.

It may be necessary to reinforce housetraining if the dog was boarded in a cage, Simpson says.

Your pet also may be dog-tired from all of the playing at a day care. The dog may have sore paws and joints from the activity, if romping is not part of its usual daily schedule.

So although you might find one facility that offers Reiki—a form of healing in which a person lays his or her hands on a body to "normalize" energy fields—and another that provides swimming-pool time, the No. 1 criteria for any facility is that your pet will be cared for by dog-crazy people who take their day job seriously.

"[It's] not just about playing with dogs all day," says day care operator Briggs. "It's about life guarding." ●