



## Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

### Distinguishing the Good Pet Care Centers from the Great Pet Care Centers

Pet care centers come in all shapes and sizes so how do you decide which one is best for your dog? Keep in mind the adage, "Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover" and follow our four-step process to narrow your search to find the great pet care centers.

**Step 1: Know What Your Pet Enjoys:** List the activities your dog enjoys. Pet care centers offer a wide range of options and you want to make sure you find one that offers activities your pet enjoys. Your list might include things like trail walks, chasing a ball, playing off-leash with other dogs, swimming, dog sports such as agility, obedience, nosework, etc., lounging on soft comfortable bedding, or cuddling with humans.



**Step 2: Know What Pet Centers are Available:** List all the possible centers in your area that offer the services your dog enjoys. Don't discount a facility because it might be smaller than others. Likewise, don't focus only on large facilities that offer every amenity possible. Right now, your criteria is whether or not the center offers activities your dog needs and enjoys. Your list may likely include a wide range of potential types of facilities such as: national brand big box stores, franchises or multi-location chains, large independent pet centers, small privately owned centers and home-based operators.

Any of these pet care centers can provide excellent pet care. But as you move to Step 3 you will learn to distinguish good quality pet care from great quality pet care. Great care is not a result of marketing budget, variety of amenities or money spent on a building. High quality pet care comes down to the people that own, manage, and work with your pet. Think of narrowing your search the same way you would if selecting a daycare for your child. You want a licensed business run by professional staff with a passion for dogs.

**Step 3: Identify Professional Pet Care Centers:** Make sure the pet care center is operating legally. You may be surprised that there are a small percentage of pet care businesses that are not legal business operators. You don't want to leave your dog with anyone that is willing to cut corners. Professional pet care centers will comply with local licensing and zoning requirements and maintain business and liability insurance. Check with your local government offices to ensure the pet care center you want to use is a legitimate business in your county.

Legal establishment of the pet care center is only one way to identify professional pet care centers. Because there is no standardization of care for pet care centers, you will also want to focus on the background and professional involvement of the pet care owner and staff. Narrow your list by reviewing the backgrounds of the management team. Review websites looking for:

- Business owners with a strong background working with pets or education in pet care (look for information that includes more than just a love of dogs or working with their own family pets.)

You want someone with a wide range of knowledge or who has some pet education outside of just on the job training).

- Content that is focused on providing quality care (look for information discussing the needs of the pet)
- Information about key staff members including their backgrounds and training (the pet care industry is a service based industry and your dog's care is only as good as the people watching him. You want to know a little about the people. Information about continuing education for the staff is a huge plus!)
- Industry involvement through membership in trade and professional organizations (look for centers affiliated with other pet care industries and resources or who regularly attend educational events.)

**Step 4: Take a Tour:** Now that your list is narrowed down it's time to plan onsite visits. Tour policies will vary by pet center so check the website or call to discuss scheduling a visit. Before you go make a list of questions that will help you finalize your selection. See our list below for ideas on questions to ask and observations to make during your visit.

Remember: Don't judge a book by its cover! It's easy to be wowed with chandeliers and nice amenities, but these are not as important to your dog as the people they spend time with when not at home. In selecting the right pet care center for your dog look for quality within the pages and not just a pretty eye-catching cover.

Using this four-step process you'll be able to distinguish the good pet care centers from the great pet care centers. You'll be able to leave your pet without worry and return home to a safe and happy dog!



## Pet Care Center Screening Questions

During your visit to a potential pet care center, use this list of questions to help you distinguish the good pet care centers from the great pet care centers.

- **How does the staff interact with the dogs?**
  - A great facility is one where the dogs and the staff members are relaxed and seem to be enjoying the day. Staff members should be communicating with the dogs through talking or giving obedience commands, but not by yelling at them.
- **What training does the owner have? The employees?**
  - Great staff members have had some type of formal education process (this might be online, attending seminars, working with consultants, reading specific books, etc). The key is to find a pet care center that values education and learning about dog body language, behavior and appropriate play. Training should be more than just shadowing a peer staff member. In addition, great centers have staff learn about basic pet first aid.
- **What are the health requirements for admission?**
  - Great centers comply with state and local regulations on vaccination requirements and will defer to your veterinarian's decision on what is best for your dog based on his age and health.
- **How do you enroll your dog in off-leash play?**
  - High quality care requires formal policies and procedures to operate safe dog play groups. Look for a pet center with an enrollment and testing process for dogs that are accepted into daycare or play groups with other dogs. This should be more than answering a few questions about the health requirements. Dogs need to visit the center and be formally evaluated.
- **How are dogs supervised?**
  - Anytime a dog is out of his lodging enclosure he should be with a staff member. If a dog is playing off-leash with other dogs, a staff member should be in the same room with the dogs. Some facilities observe off-leash play only by using web cameras. While this is an excellent tool for safety, the primary supervision should be from a trained staff member who is in the same room with the dogs.
- **What is the staff to dog ratio for off-leash play supervision?**
  - A safe daycare operates with no more than 1 person for every 10-15 dogs (depending on the size of the dogs). A smaller ratio is even better.
- **How are the dogs disciplined?**
  - Make sure you are comfortable with any methods of discipline used by the center. A high quality pet care center uses obedience commands for control more than relying on physical methods of punishment. Common correction tools of a great center include time-outs, rest periods and trained staff using obedience cues such as sit and come. Yelling and physical punishment are not appropriate or necessary management tools in a great center.
- **How are playgroups determined?**
  - A great facility will separate by size as well as by play style, age, and temperament of the dog. At a minimum you will want separate groups for small and large dogs. Tiny breeds (less than 10 pounds) should play with other small dogs of their size. Young puppies (under 5-6 months of age) should be put with other puppies and a few "puppy tolerant" adult dogs rather than placed in an adult dog playgroup.