



Can Doggy Day Care or ‘Pack Walks’ Do more harm than good?

By Angela Pitman © March 2018

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There has been a massive increase in the business of Dog Day Care and ‘Pack Walks’ over the last few years, but is this the right thing for your dog?

We would need to look at several things before coming to a decision – certainly, your dog may bound into a Day Care establishment or into the car or van of the Dog Walker, much like a child bounds into a theme park, while I appreciate that dogs are not children, the logic in the behaviour can be very similar in some respects.

How many people take their dogs to Day Care while they are out at work and when their dog has returned home again, are they so exhausted that they sleep all evening – peaceful and quiet, marvellous you may think, but then ask yourself – ‘who does my dog prefer to spend time with? Me or Day Care/Dog Walker? When you go out at the weekend with your dog, do they want to run up to every dog they see? After all, this is what happens through the week, will

they come straight back to you when you call them or have they started to ignore you? Does the other dog or owner appreciate this unwanted attention? They are not being rude, but possibly their dog is elderly/blind/deaf/not good with other dogs for some reason, seeing a dog bounding up to their dog, albeit with friendly intent, can startle or scare both dog and owner or even undo work that has been started for rehabilitation, what if the other dog is an Assistance Dog, highly trained to do a specific task for their owner, the Assistance dog will have been trained to ignore distractions but that can be impossible in the event of a boisterous dog.

Your dog’s attention on you could have been undone by attending Day Care/‘Pack Walks’ on a regular basis.

An occasional visit is fine, but a 3-4 daily occurrence can cause your dog to find you less interesting, both at home and while you are out with them, I, personally, would be most disappointed if my dog ignored me and went to everyone else and their dog in exactly the same way parents do if their child runs up to their childminder and gives them a hug leaving Mum and Dad standing alone!

It is also worth considering, does your dog actually enjoy it or are they simply putting up with it? I am regularly sent photos from across the country of groups of up to 24 dogs!

One shy dog does not become confident, they simply shut down, a reactive dog doesn't suddenly accept all dogs, they just can't take on a large group of dogs, take them back out of that environment and, out on their usual walk, there is a strong chance that they will still react to individual dogs, you then go back home feeling frustrated or a failure.



(Photos: A. Large groups of dogs crowded together. B. Dogs beds lying across electrical cables. C. No mental stimulation)

Are you being told that your dog will be kept occupied throughout the day? Are they going to be in small groups? Is there somewhere for dogs to go for some quiet time that is safe?

There are some, but very few, excellent Dog Day Care establishments, that have a good staff to dog ratio, at least 1 staff member to 4 dogs! Activities for the dogs that are structured in small groups

How do the staff cope with emergencies, (fights/injuries/sudden health issues)?

What canine specific qualifications does the owner of the day care or dog walking business have? Very often, a degree in Animal Behaviour only has one module throughout a three year degree course that covers the domestic canine!

Do they recognise the difference between inappropriate vs appropriate play? What ratio of play to rest do the dogs have? What age mix are the dogs? Are there any dogs wearing muzzles? Unless the dog with the muzzle is wearing it because it eats everything around it, it may be wearing it because it has issues with other dogs and it is on as a safety feature for other dogs but how does that dog feel, it is wearing a muzzle and is forced to mingle with dogs it may not be comfortable with, but it has no option but to put up with it.

These are also NOT the places for very young puppies to spend their day, it can be overwhelming and stressful, although it seems a great idea to have a very tired puppy when you come home from work or a day out, the interaction with other dogs is almost non-stop and may not all be good, that is not to say other dogs will attack him but an adult dog being a little over boisterous in greeting, may knock the puppy over, or even accidentally injure him, puppies are not very good at self-regulating themselves for rest and downtime, there will

always be something going on in the background that will disturb his sleep and what sleep he does get will not be good quality sleep so may take up to two days to fully recover, puppies can need between 18-20hrs sleep, is the Daycare going to have quiet areas, away from the other dogs where he can rest and if so, is there going to be a member of staff keeping an eye on the pup to ensure he doesn't chew cables or furniture?

'Pack Walks' look great on television, groups of 6-12 (sometimes even more) dogs all being walked together, seemingly in harmony, but by observing body language and avoidance behaviours tell a very different story, a canine social group in the wild, or as street dogs, are naturally formed, they are not forced together after a brief meeting where they may have been overwhelmed by the other dogs, put into a van with 4-10 other dogs and driven off where they may or may not be let off their lead to run about.

While some dogs may cope well in this sort of situation, equally, many do not, and the signals seen by some of the dogs in these photos will not change a dog's behaviour for the better and make them accept other dogs, nor will it mean that your dog will no longer pull on the lead.

Almost every behaviourist across the country, has seen a massive increase in loss of recall, jumping up at strangers, pestering other dogs, lead frustration and lead reactivity.



Note the head lowering, the avoidance behaviours, the narrow eyes and the tight mouths, all classic stress signs.



How well ventilated are the vans? Do they have air conditioning or is cool air reliant on open windows while driving, if your dog is the first of six to be collected, how long is it in the van or car until it reaches the destination? Possibly 10 minutes between each dog, 6 dogs collected, that is 1 hour! If there is no air conditioning, that is quite a time for your dog to be in a vehicle with just the windows open slightly!

Dogs will naturally sleep up to 18 hrs a day, this is how they are genetically designed, it would be more of a concern if a dog doesn't sleep as much as they used to as it could indicate a health issue or stress, so a full day of almost on stop activity can become a problem for your dog.

The time spent awake is spent foraging for food, looking for a mate, (okay, we don't want to encourage more puppies) and reading their 'pee mails' by sniffing about to find out who has been visiting during the night, some of this can be mimicked on a walk with us while we take our dogs out, for foraging, try hiding a favourite scent article or soft toy for them to find and then play with them for a few minutes before hiding it again, you can try dropping it behind you as you walk and then send you dog back to find it again.

Walk with a friend with their dog, this is still socialising but in a much more natural and polite manner.

Checking out 'pee mails' when out with you, don't make the walk a route march, allow sniffing of gate posts, lamp posts, shrubbery, this is important for a dog as they gain so much

information by doing this, it is also more mentally tiring as they also have to process all the information they have gleaned, if their brain is tired, you will have a calmer and much happier dog who looks forward to going out with you.

You chose to bring your lovely companion into your home, enjoy your time with them.