

The Right Environment

In Part I of this two-part feature, *Nikki Sherwin* introduces P.I.E.C.E.S.©, a practical method for assessing the key components required to make canine day care a safe and enjoyable experience

Let's say you are looking for a dog day care where your precious pup can feel safe and happy. Have you asked other dog owners for recommendations? Have you visited any facilities and checked them out? Are you unsure of what to look for? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then this article is for you. It will help you choose a doggie day care by providing information about the key elements that constitute a quality day care. It will also present a clear and easy to understand system that you can use to help you find such a day care. It will explain how you can look for a day care that covers all the P.I.E.C.E.S.©.

P.I.E.C.E.S.© is a system that offers a quick and simple means to assess day care facilities. It can be used for owners, trainers and day care facilities. The principles of P.I.E.C.E.S.© are as follows:

- Positive Pillars
- Interconnected
- Education
- Choice
- Enriched Environment
- Safety

P.I.E.C.E.S.© is based on positive approaches in day care and it is important that the day care you seek practices these principles. Day cares have an influence on your dog's behavior. By practicing P.I.E.C.E.S.©, the day care maintains a healthy, caring and respectful environment. In the billion-dollar dog industry, day care is a rapidly growing business, but there are no established standards or guiding principles. P.I.E.C.E.S.© fills these gaps.

Positive Pillars

How do staff at the day care manage behavior? What will the day care do if a dog acts inappropriately?

Positive Pillars encompasses non-threatening approaches to managing dog behavior without compromising the dog's safety or damaging the human-dog relationship. It includes both reinforcing desirable behavior and implementing methods to decrease undesirable behaviors.

Positive reinforcement: Also known as +R, this involves following a dog's desirable behavior with something the dog finds rewarding, thereby making the behavior more likely to happen in the future. Positive reinforcement builds trust between the dog and the person; trust and respect are achieved because the dog



is not threatened in any manner.

Decreasing undesirable behaviors: Positive methods are used to interrupt a behavior followed by redirecting the dog to more favorable choice. For example, a dog gets over-aroused during play with another dog. Positive methods include using voice cues, gestures, and happy noises ('yeahs' or kissy sounds) to redirect. Neutrally separating and moving the dogs to a more favorable location such as an alternate area or friendship group decreases arousal.

A day care that uses both of these pillars captures desirable behaviors and uses methods to redi-

rect behavior. This sets the dog up for success without confrontation. In my opinion, setting dogs up for success is rewarding not only to the person in day care management, but to the dog as well. Studies have shown dogs to be more intelligent than once thought, with the ability to understand our emotions and our gestural signals (O'Hare, n.d.). Using the Pillars is a win-win for the dog, the caregivers and the day care environment.

Interconnected

Day cares offering exceptional service need to consider how canine parents are welcomed during drop-off and pick up periods. Engaging the dog owner is an important part of building the team approach to care. Communication between the day care and the parent is crucial and day cares can accomplish this in a number of ways:

1. Providing updates of dogs' visits such as how they play with friends and when they make new ones.
2. Discussing observed behavioral changes.
3. Encouraging canine parents to inform the day care about changes that may impact the dog's behavior is important. For example, a move or a change in family dynamics may cause a change in the dog's behavior. Such information helps day care staff watch for any changes, and respond accordingly.
4. Notifying canine parents of contagions at the facility (e.g. kennel cough). Open and honest communication fosters trust between the day care and clients.
5. Providing a way to connect through technology such as webcams, live streaming TV or a two-way mirror. Any one of these provides the pet parents with the opportunity to observe



PET CARE

their dogs, how they are handled and how the dogs interact.

Education

Are day care staff educated in positive approaches to dog day care management? What is the training protocol for new staff? Do they understand dog behavior, canine communication and how to monitor dog stress? Day cares assume responsibility for many dogs. Dogs are unique in personality, energy levels, play styles, and communication. There are also breed specific behaviors and individual histories to understand and accommodate.

It is the job of the facility to ensure staff have the knowledge and skills to understand the many, sometimes subtle, signs of behavior change in dogs. This includes being able to notice changes in a dog's unique characteristics. Ongoing education and networking allow staff to stay current in and maintain quality care.

According to Louise Stapleton-Frappell, dog trainer, author, instructor, faculty member of DogNostics Career College and regional coordinator of Doggone Safe in Spain: "...anyone working in the pet care field has an obligation to learn about canine communication so that they are able to quickly recognize not only the signs of a happy and relaxed dog, but also any sign of stress, anxiety, over-arousal, reactivity and perhaps even imminent bite."

Choice

Does your dog day care focus on giving dogs choices, or does it try to control the dog? When possible, giving dogs choice empowers them and builds their confidence.

Connecting with dogs, setting them up for success, understanding their cues, responding to them and giving them encouragement will build the foundation for their choices. This takes more time and effort for day care staff, but the reward is watching dogs grow in social skills, confidence, and making good choices.

For example, dogs can be given choices as soon as they enter day care and the play area. Are they given the time and space to enter the day care when they are ready? A choice like this can help build the dog's confidence.

In another example, a dog that is over-stimulated can be also given a choice. The day care worker cues the dog and the dog then has the choice to go to the person (desirable behavior) instead of engaging in a potential conflict (undesirable behavior). When a good choice is made, the dog receives rewards such as affection or going to a favorite place in the building. Choice is rewarding for the dog, the staff, and even the dog's friends. Dogs in this type of care have the opportunity to calm down, connect with their care providers, and choose to resume play in a better frame of mind. Perhaps even a new friend is found from that choice.

Angelica Steinker, accredited canine behavior consultant and owner of Courteous Canine Inc. DogSmith of Tampa, Florida, points out that: "Dogs must be carefully monitored during play... If the person monitoring play fails to redirect... dog fights can occur... Even one dog fight can cause personality changes in a dog [and] a dog that was previously fine with other dogs can become afraid or even begin displaying dog reactivity."



Day cares should have measures in place to interrupt play if dogs get over-aroused



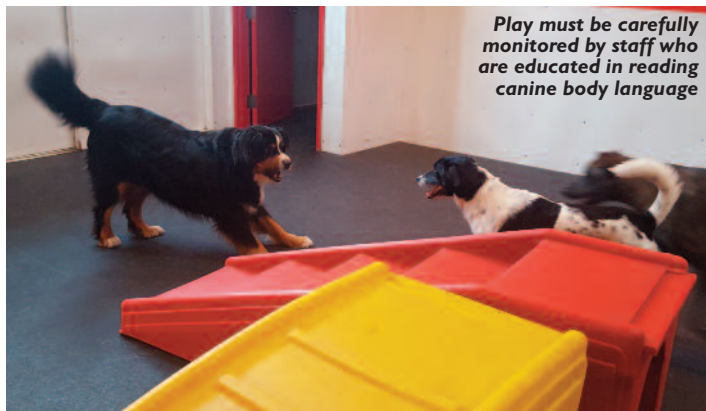
Providing updates of a dog's day care visits is a good way to interact with clients



Day care staff should be skilled in understanding canine communication and recognizing stress



Empowering dogs to make their own choices can help build their confidence



Play must be carefully monitored by staff who are educated in reading canine body language



Enriched Environment

Is the day care clean and well maintained? Has the space been designed to enrich the dog's playtime or is it just a space? To answer this, look for services that enhance your dog's experience. Such services should include but are not limited to the following:

- Encouraging appropriate play using positive methods as described and placing dogs of similar play styles and energy levels together.
- Having a set of behavioral guidelines to build dog confidence and social skills using positive methods.
- Offering access to a safe outdoor area for dogs to relieve themselves.
- Offering a safe outdoor play area to give dogs the ability to ask to exit the facility as needed.
- Controlling the day care climate so it is comfortable for the dogs.
- Designing the facility to give dogs options to play in different areas (multi levels, different rooms, different play areas).
- Providing ample space for dogs to play and interact without being overcrowded.

Safety

When selecting a day care, there are many questions to ask about safety. Safety includes building standards and guidelines, and also encompasses the safety of the dog physically, psychologically and emotionally. Questions you should ask could include the following:

- Is the day care using positive approaches to maintain and strengthen healthy dog-human relations and giving choice to dogs to foster empowerment?
- Does the day care provide information on its safety features and guidelines?
- Does the day care screen new applicants for any history of aggression or other behavioral issues? Do they have a "meet and greet" prior to new dogs entering the facility?
- Does the day care provide close supervision of the dogs throughout the day?
- What is the dog-to-human ratio?
- Are new dogs introduced slowly to the group(s) of day care friends? Dogs that meet new friends one at a time or in very small groups tend to be less stressed during introductions to a new environment.

- Are there separate areas for dogs of different sizes and energy levels?
- Are the entry and exit points to the facility monitored and secure?
- Can unknown people have access to the day care? Bennett (2005), author of *All About Dog Day Cares... A Blueprint for Success* stated: "A facility should not provide open tours and access to dogs as this is very disruptive and gets them riled up."
- Are the floors suitable for dog play? When a day care is considering flooring best suited and safe for the dogs, a good choice is rubberized. Rubber floors provide good traction to minimize slipping and hitting into walls while playing. A second safety feature is that they provide shock absorption to reduce stress on joints.

These are the primary components of the P.I.E.C.E.S.© approach to assessing a dog day care facility to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for all dogs. ■

The second part of this article will focus on what dog owners should be alert to and consider to be red flags in terms of their dog's safety, as well as his physical and psychological well-being.

References

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. (2007). Position Statement on the use of punishment for behavior modification. Retrieved July 17, 2016, from www.avsonline.org/resources/position-statements

Bennett, R. K. (2005). *All About Dog Day Care... A Blueprint for Success*. Woodbridge, VA: C&R Publishing

O'Hare, B. (n.d.). The Genius of Dogs - New Discoveries about the Intelligence of Man's Best Friend. Retrieved July 17, 2016, from www.apdt.com/education/webinars/archives/docs/100138_1_tydm_webinar_-_canine_intelligence.pdf

Resources

Becker, M. (2012). Want a Well-Behaved Dog? Do More of This and Less of That. Retrieved July 17, 2016, from www.healthypets.mercola.com/sites/healthypets/archive/2012/08/03/positive-reinforcement-dog-training.aspx

Cattet, J. (2014, March) How Do Dogs Think? The Scientific Revolution in Dog Intelligence. Retrieved July 17, 2016, from www.blog.smartanimaltraining.com/2014/03/04/how-do-dogs-think-the-scientific-revolution-in-dog-intelligence

Miller, P. (2001). *The Power of Positive Training*. New York, NY: Howell Bookhouse

Stapleton-Frappell, L. (Producer). (2015). How to Teach Your Dog to Love Wearing a Muzzle [Video] Retrieved July 17, 2016, from www.youtu.be/QE19qm07_Vs

The Muzzle Up Project: www.muzzleupproject.com

Nikki Sherwin holds a BA in psychology and a child and youth worker certificate. She started out working with children with behavior issues and, since 1997, has been a professional dog trainer. For the past nine years she has owned Woofs 'n Wags dog day care and canine educational facility, www.Woofsnwags.ca, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. She has also pioneered an educational forum called Canine Community Connects (CCC) with the goal of bringing like-minded positive trainers together at seminars.

