

An evaluation has become an expected part of the off-leash dog daycare and boarding experience. Most daycares will conduct evaluations with the goal of gathering background on your dog and setting up test conditions to gauge if your dog will enjoy the off-leash experience. Over the years we have learned that even if a dog enjoys being around people and/or dogs in general, that doesn't always translate to them enjoying the daycare experience. We take it a step further in our evaluation process to proactively create a path for success by creating a personalized plan to help your dog adapt to the various stimuli in daycare.

At daycare, your dog will encounter many different people. Before we observe how your dog will interact with other dogs, we want to gauge how your dog interacts with people. After all we are strangers to your dog and we will be asking your dog to trust us when we handle them for various things such as removing collars, leashing up for walks, feeding, interacting with toys, removing things from their mouth when needed, lifting to be placed in crates, and if requested baths and nail trims. Our team is very diverse and we want to have confidence that your dog will be comfortable with all the many employees your dog may encounter during their time with us. This can be challenging for some dogs, especially those that have had limited exposure to people or bad experiences before finding the loving home they are in now. The additional complexity is that this is occurring in a new environment and with a lot of different sounds and odors they may not have been exposed to before.

The first thing we do is conduct an intake. During this discussion we learn more about your dog's background and how you plan to utilize daycare services. While we are doing this, we are "ignoring" your dog to give them space to breathe and adjust to the new environment and the person doing your intake. However, we are assessing your dog's actions during this time.

- Does your dog choose to engage with us (i.e. coming over to say "hi")?
- Does your dog seem overwhelmed by the other dogs barking in the background?
- Does your dog seem curious and ready to investigate meeting new friends?
- Does your dog allow us to touch them or are they sensitive to some body parts like the head, collar, feet?

Our goal is to help foster each new experience so they are positive experiences for your dog. For shy dogs, this may take time. We have experienced many dogs who are very hesitant in the lobby, unsure of their surroundings and they may cling to you. We also experience dogs whose body language is stiff, not loose or relaxed, or appear on alert. Some dogs with this posture will relax as they begin meeting other dogs, however some will not.

After we get an initial gauge on how your dog is around people and being in a new environment, we will bring your dog back to an empty playgroup. We want your dog to choose to walk with us willingly

to investigate a new room, as they separate from you. Sometimes this choice requires us to provide an additional incentive, something positive like a treat or fun toy, and sometimes we'll need your help to encourage the dog by walking a few steps with us to build "momentum" in the direction we are headed.

As we walk through the facility, we will next enter an empty playgroup to give your dog a chance to explore the room without any additional pressure of meeting other dogs. We want the dog to enter the playgroup willingly, without being carried into the area.

Once in the play area, we look to see how your dog reacts. The level of stimuli increases beyond what the dog was experiencing in the lobby. Your dog is in an empty playgroup but there are other playgroups that are active with dogs playing and being vocal. We assess how your dog responds to this noise volume and the scents in the playroom.

- Does your dog start exploring?
- Does your dog look for the exit and hang back by the gate to leave?
- Does their behavior in the lobby differ from their behavior in an empty playroom?
- Does your dog cling to the person in the room conducting the evaluation?

Your dog will likely do a lot of sniffing as they "read" the room. We want to give them ample time to do this and adjust before introducing dogs. When we bring in the dogs, we will introduce them one at a time. We will select dogs that we think will make a good first introduction with your dog, based on what we have learned about your dog thus far. We typically start with an easy going, low-key dog. We assess how your dog responds to this first dog introduction. If things go well, we begin to introduce a few other dogs with various personalities to assess how your dog does in a group setting.

- Does your dog seem receptive to meeting a new dog?
- Is your dog's body language loose or does your dog stiffen at the sight of another dog?
- Does your dog run for the exit?
- How does your dog communicate with other dogs?
- Is your dog showing signs of play?
- Is your dog a good communicator of when they want to play or when they do not?
- How does your dog read another dog's communication when the other dog wants to play or when they do not?
- How does your dog play, what playstyle do they engage with other dogs?

From these observations we begin to understand better whether your dog is open to the daycare experience at our facility. We also begin to frame which playgroup would be the best fit for your dog initially, though it is common for dogs to change playgroups throughout their tenure with us.

Lastly, we also assess how your dog interacts with toys and crates. Toys are a big part of almost all of our playgroups. Some dogs are not comfortable sharing resources with other dogs and that's okay. For this reason we have dedicated one playgroup without toys.

Crates are an essential part of our daily routine at daycare. Your dog will be fed snacks and meals in a crate. They will rest in a crate twice a day as part of our daily schedule, and if they board with us, overnight as well. In addition, we have limited crates in playgroups so that we have a place for dogs to go to take calming breaks. They are also used when we need to rotate dogs that have differing playstyles or personality disagreements. For example, if one dog is more spatially-sensitive while the other dog tends to be in their personal space often, pushing this issue. This can lead to two dogs that are good with everyone else in the group but not each other thus we manage this by rotating these dogs in crates.

- Does your dog choose to walk into an open crate?
- How does your dog respond when we close the door?
- Is your dog immediately calm or does it take time for your dog to relax?
- Is your dog vocal or actively trying to escape?

Dogs that are not receptive to crates, cannot tolerate them, or have trouble with being led into a crate will need to work on that skill before they are able to attend daycare. Our trainers are also ready to work with you to build positive associations with the crate.

Learning about your dog and observing your dog through the above assessments takes about 45 minutes. It is impossible to really know all there is to know about your dog in that short period of time but it's a start. It takes time for dogs to feel comfortable and be their true selves. The dog we meet at the evaluation may not be the same dog after attending daycare for a few weeks. The evaluations are just the initial step in helping our team determine any major issues that would result in your dog not being the best fit for our daycare. This can also mean that dogs who pass the evaluation with flying colors, begin attending daycare regularly, and overtime we develop concerns about their behavior. Behavior is fluid. It will change over time. Your dog will experience things outside the daycare environment that may also impact (on any given day) how they behave in daycare. Our goal is to have open communication with you every step of the way.

At the conclusion of our evaluation, we will provide a recommended approach to help your dog adjust to daycare and for us to continue to learn more about your dog's behavior while here. We call this the "adjustment period" which can take several weeks, each dog is different. This may mean we recommend your dog only attend a half day of daycare or specific days of the week. Think of it like

people who may enjoy attending a party for only a few hours, while others may enjoy partying all night. During this adjustment period, we begin to build a history of observing your dog's interactions with more people, more dogs, and more play styles and personalities.

This adjustment period is critical for dogs who plan to board with us. Boarding dogs are here 24/7 which can add its own level of stress on your dog. We also know that if you're seeking an evaluation specifically for boarding, there is the added time pressure of finding a place before you leave town. We have to make sure your dog is fully comfortable here before we can approve them to board. We want to reduce the risk of anything unusual occurring while you are away because if your dog is boarding with us, it means you're not readily available to come pick your dog up from daycare if needed. The more we are able to see your dog in a playgroup, the better we are able to make that judgment. In fact, our recommendation would be to build a relationship in daycare before ever needing to board your dog. And continue having your dog attend daycare so that when you need boarding, your dog is familiar with the environment and it becomes their home away from home. Your dog will be more relaxed and calm in an environment they know well.