

## What Makes a Great Off Leash Play Group?

As dog parks continue to increase in popularity, pet owners are becoming more interested in finding a pet care facility that offers quality daycare or playgroups for their dog. How can you make sure your facility is at the top of the pack when it comes to offering great off leash play environments? Ask yourself these simple questions and get to work on any areas that might need improvement.

1. **How is your staff trained?** – Without training, your staff is just a bunch of folks who love dogs. Your staff should understand canine body language, recognize stress signals, know when aggressive displays are normal reactions to the other dogs and when they are cause for alarm, and display excellent leadership skills to work with dogs without intimidation, corrections or physical manipulation of the animal. If these skills don't describe the body of knowledge for your staff, start working to formalize your staff training program. Just as a parent shouldn't leave their child at a beach without a properly trained lifeguard, neither should an owner leave their dog at a daycare without a properly trained attendant. The trick to reducing accidents during off leash play and ensuring dogs are having fun is to have a formal staff training program.

2. **How do you assess the dogs?** - Not every dog likes off leash play. It's up to the staff to know when it's a good idea and when it's best to offer the owner other alternatives. There should be a formal process for evaluating dogs for group play. In order to select the proper dogs for your particular facility, there should be a screening process that involves asking questions of the owner, verifying health and vaccination records, and then introducing the potential new dog to other dogs attending playgroup. There should also be an ongoing process to monitor the dog's play activities and stress level. The goal is to make sure every dog is having fun and leaving the center behaviorally better than when he arrived. If you don't have a written process for documenting this type of assessment and monitoring program, start working on one today!

3. **How do you supervise the dogs?** – If you aren't close enough to respond, supervision isn't helpful. Where is your staff when they are watching the dogs? The great facilities have someone on hand, physically in the room with the dogs whenever the dogs are together. Watching through a window, or from another play yard, or through a television monitor is better than nothing, but still won't give you enough time to respond to any problems as they arise. Dog play is fluid and fast. You only have seconds to intervene in order to prevent a problem from escalating or redirect a dog that needs assistance. Well-trained staff should be physically with the dogs. If this isn't happening, restructure your prices and staffing to ensure you can better care for and supervise the dogs in your center.

4. **What is your staff to dog ratio?** – Even the best-trained staff should only supervise a limited number of dogs. As a general rule of thumb, a safe ration is a ratio of no more than 1 person to every 10-15 dogs. A smaller ratio is even better. This ratio is dependent on the size of the dogs and the experience of the staff. The staff to dog ratio is also dependent on the mix of dogs. Sometimes eight dogs feels like 25 and 15 feels like five. This really just depends on how well the dogs interact together. But even with a well-managed group run by an experienced staff member, if you have more than 15 dogs, you are taking a risk in the event of a scuffle or fight. One person alone will not be able to safely separate and monitor a large group of dogs in case of an emergency. Check the staff to dog ratios at your facility and consider adjusting your playgroups to make things safer for both dogs and humans.

These are just four key areas to address to ensure your pet care facility can move from good to great in the area of off leash dog play! Good luck!



For your best resources on off-leash dog play, visit The Dog Gurus at [www.thedoggurus.com](http://www.thedoggurus.com) and join Robin Bennett and Susan Briggs in making off-leash play a safe place for all dogs!