

## Why Multiple Playgroups are an Asset to Your Dog's Experience at Daycare

Dogs share many social characteristics with humans. They usually enjoy social interactions but can have specific likes and dislikes. Dogs are also animals that greatly benefit from a consistent and structured routine. Daycare for dogs can be a very essential part of their routine and greatly benefit the way they learn and practice social skills.

At Fur-Get Me Not, our standard daycare service prioritizes whether or not a dog is comfortable and thriving in our environment. There are numerous dogs that are willing to tolerate being in a place they aren't comfortable in, surrounded by things they aren't comfortable with. However we strive to work with each dog's family to ensure that dogs who aren't enjoying our daycare environment aren't forced to endure it. This is also one of the reasons why we continue to offer in-home pet care services (i.e. dog walking and pet sitting).

Our enrichment services and the design of our playgroups are two ways in which we increase the chances that your dog will enjoy their time at our daycare. We offer multiple enrichment opportunities to engage their senses through interactions with our team and our environment. Our goal is to give your dog experiences that will create positive connotations with the environment. We think a combination of physical play and mental stimulation is the path to a happy, relaxed dog.

Our daycare space was intentionally designed in a way to enable us to offer multiple playgroups. This feature allows a wide variety of canine personalities to find their best match and to thrive. Size can be a key factor to prevent a large dog from accidentally injuring a smaller one, but we also consider a dog's energy level, temperament, and playstyle. Each of our playgroups focus on personality types and we often move dogs between playgroups in order to find the best match on any given day. Our playgroups also drive our staffing model as there is at least one team member in each playgroup. Dogs are never left in a playgroup unsupervised. Having five playgroups plus additional team members outside of the playgroup to support and drive the day, means there are many people helping to ensure your dog has a good day.

We compose our playgroups with these general parameters:

**Playgroup A:** large breed adults, moderate to high energy level, well-socialized. They enjoy wrestling and playing with other dogs. These dogs are capable of matching the energy of their playmates, high or low, and have good interpretation skills, meaning they recognize and respond accordingly to the cues the other dog is displaying.

**Playgroup B:** medium-large adult dogs, generally older in age and lower energy level. They may prefer people to other dogs. Some may have a history of resource guarding toys. They may communicate their preferences well but sometimes more strongly than necessary. They can suffer from social anxiety, prefer slower introductions and interactions, or have space sensitivities where they prefer a wider distance or proximity to other dogs. For these reasons, we do not provide coveted resources like toys in this playgroup and it is generally made up of fewer dogs.

**Playgroup C:** smaller breed dogs, large breed puppies, moderate-high energy level. This group generally consists of younger puppies less than 2 years of age which also means this age group is still learning how to read other dogs' cues and how to respond appropriately. They enjoy heavy contact playing, wrestling, and chasing other dogs.

**Playgroup D:** young puppies, small breed adults and large breed seniors. These dogs typically enjoy people interaction more than other dogs. They often have low to moderate energy levels. This group occasionally includes the youngest, smallest, and most timid puppies. Dogs in this group may be well-mannered, have mature social skills, and are able to communicate well with each other whether or not they want to play. It's a mix of lap dogs, semi-playful dogs, and dogs who prefer to lounge or spectate.

**Playgroup E:** large breed puppies and adolescents. These dogs have a moderate to high energy level, typically with immature social skills, but are very playful. Most have yet to learn how to self-regulate and take breaks from play. This group may also include playful adult dogs that are well-socialized and are able to respectfully teach the younger dogs how to communicate appropriately to regulate their energy. These dogs really enjoy wrestling-style play with other dogs.

Our goal is to foster each dog's unique personality and to use our playgroups to accommodate their comfort level at their pace. We have seen many cases of adult dogs who haven't experienced a daycare environment until later in adulthood, but enjoy playing with other dogs. A new environment can be intimidating but we see the potential in these dogs and we create a path for them to succeed. We usually start them in a lower energy group of mature dogs and have them participate in short half days of daycare on a consistent basis until they become more comfortable and confident. Once we see these dogs come out of their shell, we transition them into a playgroup with dogs who have like-minded play styles. It is not unusual for it to take some time for a dog to become comfortable and showcase their true personalities, so we give them time to adapt and let them lead us.

Over the years, we have witnessed numerous dogs grow up and move through many, if not all, of our

playgroups. A dog's preference and behavior can and will change with age and experiences. Here are a few examples:

We had a very sweet boy named Finnegan, a Bernese Mountain Dog, who started daycare at 3 months old in playgroup D. As he grew in size and confidence he moved to playgroup C, where the other active small dogs were a better fit for his fast growing size. He then moved to playgroup E for his adolescent years, and then on to playgroup A by the time he was 2 years old.

Another example is Beowulf, a Norwegian Elkhound, who started off in our daycare as an energetic adolescent in playgroup C. Once he matured socially and physically, he was too much for the small active dogs so we moved him to playgroup A. He later became more interested in human attention versus playing with dogs and so playgroup B was a better fit. Beowulf still enjoys boarding and occasional daycare.

A third example is a sweet boy named Joey. Joey is a Beagle mix, who came to us as an energetic and rambunctious puppy in playgroup C. He initially had too much energy for the more people-centric playgroup D dogs. However Joey later developed some anxiety that caused him to be more introverted with his playmates in playgroup C, so we moved him to playgroup D, where he could focus more on smaller and slower interactions. He is also working with our training team, learning to conquer his anxiety and gain confidence in different environments.

Daycare is a great option for dogs but if all the above factors aren't accounted for, it can quickly turn into a place where dogs become uncomfortable. There is a lot of activity in a typical daycare environment. There are a variety of dogs with different communication skills, multiple playstyles, lots of sounds, various people coming and going, and just a lot of activity in general. We pride ourselves on taking safety to the next level, which also elevates the happiness and comfort of the dogs who attend. We recognize your dogs are family and we want to provide the best care for them by providing them the most fulfilling lives possible, as best we can.