

A Dog's Life  
Pampered Pooches at Doggy Day Care

By Erin Mantz

*If you take your dog to a doggy day care center, they might not want to come home. From spa treatments to birthday parties, your dog might be living better than you are...*

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It's 7 a.m. as Alex Matthews of Bethesda turns into the driveway at Kenwood Canine Clubhouse in Bethesda. His fox terriers, Nick and Nora, jump out of the car and romp inside the doggy day care center without looking back. Nora chases a ball with Labrador Casey, while Nick climbs into staffer and Largo resident Jeff Brown's lap. If Matthews couldn't have provided the pups' transportation that day, they could have taken a shuttle bus. Kenwood offers round-trip rides for an extra \$35 a day (\$20 for a one-way ride).

At PetSmart in Bethesda, the "Bone Booth" (aka "phone booth") is buzzing; owners can call in to "talk to" their dogs in day care or boarding. A staffer actually gets the dog from playgroup, brings him to the booth and holds him up to the phone. On Christmas Day, more than 30 people called their dogs.

Welcome to the world of doggy day care.

More and more Bethesda-area dogs are living the high life at fast-growing doggy day care centers. Step inside North Bethesda's Dogtopia (formerly Happy Tails) and find your dog's name on his playroom cubby. He can climb on playground equipment, wrestle with friends or doze on the futon. And, while you're away, you can check on your pet via webcam.

Dogtopia staffer McKenna Mason of North Bethesda can spot doggy cliques and identify leaders, followers and best friends. "Sometimes, older, confident dogs even "teach" the puppies how to act right," Mason says. Canine clients from pit bulls to pugs celebrate birthdays and Halloween here. Birthday party guests eat cake and pop bubbles. Staffers catch the cutest moments on camera and a graphic designer creates a birthday card.

Halloween means pet treats and costume contests (last year's winner was a Lab dressed as Wonder Bread).

If this atmosphere sounds ideal, that's exactly what Dogtopia President and dog owner Amy Nichols hoped for when she opened Dogtopia's 20,000-square-foot North Bethesda location. Nichols is not surprised doggy day care is taking off. "A well-exercised dog is a better pet, yet people here have busy lives. When our owners get home, they can relax and unwind with a happy dog." Of day care costs, which range from \$20 for a half day to between \$27 to \$33 per day here (owners save money by purchasing packages), Nichols insists "people will find room in their budget."

Kensington resident Karen Cooke began taking six-month-old Trixie to Dogtopia three days a week when her kids returned to school, so Trixie would not be alone. "The webcam in Trixie's playroom gives me a sense of security," Cooke says. "It's nice that Dogtopia is so transparent. I also like getting her groomed there." A Day Spa Package, which costs \$20 for a half-day of daycare, plus spa fees depending on services and grooming selected, lets Trixie do day care in the morning and a relaxing spa treatment/grooming in the afternoon. Spa treatments include a bath in what Nichols describes as a "dog Jacuzzi," a conditioning treatment, "pawdicure" with toenails painted by request, and brush-out.

Camaraderie, check-ups and cuddles rule the day at Kenwood Canine Clubhouse, where Practice Manager Jen Turner provides rope toys and Frisbees. Since the Clubhouse is part of Kenwood Animal Hospital, some dogs dash down the hall for routine vaccines and heartworm tests. Both large and small dogs seem to interact well in the one playroom, thanks to Kenwood's careful dog evaluations. When young Rottweiler Cash comes in late, you'd think a celebrity arrived! He jumps up and kisses playmate Lark through the window, paws the door and is surrounded by playmates.

Anneliese Johnson of Rockville's Norbeck area, owner/"Captain" of Ana's Ark Doggie Depot in Rockville, has been watching dogs for almost five years. She usually has about forty-five dogs a day in her care with the help of two or three staffers. Around 85 percent of dogs boarding here also do daycare. Owners can sign pups up for a training session or check playtime thanks to the webcam. Large dogs run through a gigantic playroom and all play in a fenced-in yard. Johnson knows her charges well; many started years ago as puppies and she's helped them grow into adults. She knows that Great Dane "Baby" loves to be petted and which dogs like cold weather.

What keeps her here is what made her start this business. “Dogs simply love you,” she states.

At Bethesda’s PetSmart, a tiny Maltese named Cuddles rules the playroom. Known as the “Godfather of Day Camp,” he has camp seniority. “He’s little, but he keeps everybody in line,” says staffer Philip Pickner of Virginia. Lucky campers here receive a Lactose-Free Ice Cream Sundae—one of several dog treats that owners can select for additional fees. Some pampered pooches relax in suites—private rooms with televisions and cots—for an extra twenty dollars.

These centers all have strict dog evaluations and vaccine requirements. Many train staff to recognize dog “calming signals” and intervene accordingly. Dogs use these signals to communicate with each other when they need more space, want a playmate to back off, feel uncomfortable or are ready to play. When problems like aggressive behavior arise, time-outs, behavior notes to owners and “three-strike” rules kick in.

Many dog owners believe day care is good for their pets; they use it to socialize dogs, ease separation anxiety or appease a visiting Grandma. While many owners use all-day care because they have to be at the office, a significant number use it for many other reasons. Some Dogtopia clients come in because their homes are on the market. One Kenwood Canine Clubhouse client, a work-at-home “dad”, decided it was time for daycare when his furry friend wouldn’t stop knocking the phone from his hand for attention! Day care can save dogs’—and owners’—sanity from the chaos of a child’s birthday party or a home renovation.

Dog trainer Ralph Moores of Seabrook is a familiar face to many Bethesda dog owners, likes (301.306.0093 or 301.580.0755) “the constant repetition of meeting other dogs” for socialization. In an interview with Potomac’s Debra Ekman, author of *The Dog Book: What You Should Know About Dogs* (Hillard & Harris Publishers, 2006), dog trainer and owner of 10 dogs, Ekman says she can tell which were socialized and which were not. When seeing a stranger, the non-socialized dogs act afraid and may bark aggressively or hide.

“A fabulous way of enriching a dog’s life is to provide canine companionship,” says Dr. E. Kathryn Meyer, V.M.D., who owns and operates Gaithersburg’s Veterinary Behavior Clinic. “Put dogs in situations

where they can learn to interact with other dogs. They can expend energy at day care or at home chewing furniture. A tired puppy is a good puppy!”

Liz Greenhouse of North Bethesda, owner of two-year-old Standard Poodle Charlie, couldn't agree more as she leads her exhausted pup out of Dogtopia and home for dinner. After bringing him since he was four months old, she recalls one day last summer day when he had obviously been playing outside in the day care baby pool. “He was wet, he was tired, and he was happy.”

*Erin Mantz is a writer and Washington Parent magazine's editor at large. A Potomac resident, she is the proud owner of Rizzo, a pug.*

### ***SIDEBAR:***

#### **Where To Give Your Dog The Time Of His Life**

Here is a sampling of area doggy day care facilities. Rates are available on their Web sites or by contacting the center directly.

##### **Dogtopia Day Care & Spa**

Half and full-day weekday day care; multiple-day and one month unlimited weekday passes; family discounts, Day Spa Packages, grooming on premises; webcams; decks for fresh air; birthday parties for day care dogs. 4920 Wyaconda Road, North Bethesda, 240-514-0210

[www.happytailsdogspa.com/whiteflint/index.php](http://www.happytailsdogspa.com/whiteflint/index.php)

##### **Kenwood Canine Clubhouse**

Hourly, daily or weekday day care packages; shuttle bus pick-up and delivery by reservation; day care in conjunction with boarding; basic veterinary check-ups.

[5439 Butler Road, Bethesda, 301-654-3000](http://5439ButlerRoadBethesda3016543000)

[www.kenwoodvet.com/doggy\\_day\\_care.php](http://www.kenwoodvet.com/doggy_day_care.php)

##### **PetSmart**

Doggie Day Camp day rates and packages; daycare in conjunction with boarding; weekday hours until 9 p.m.; snack sign-up; report cards; suites with televisions; grooming on premises.

6800 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda, 240-497-1980

[www.petsmart.com/doggiedaycamp/index.shtml](http://www.petsmart.com/doggiedaycamp/index.shtml)

##### **Ana's Ark Doggie Depot**

Half-day, full-day day care, discount packages and monthly rates; day care in conjunction with boarding; training options; Saturday hours; webcams; grooming on premises; outside time in fenced yard; air purifiers in playrooms.

7300-1 Westmore Road, Rockville, 301-738-6781

[www.anasark.com/Day\\_care.aspx](http://www.anasark.com/Day_care.aspx)

### **Best Friends Pet Care**

Full-day weekday doggy day camp; daily report cards; value packages; grooming on premises; day care in conjunction with boarding; webcams.

[395 Muddy Branch Road](http://395MuddyBranchRoad), Gaithersburg, 301-926-6005

[www.bestfriendspetcare.com/DayCamp.cfm](http://www.bestfriendspetcare.com/DayCamp.cfm)

### **Cleverdog Grooming and Day Care, Silver Spring**

Full-day and day care packages; family discounts; grooming on premises.

[2621 Garfield Ave.](http://2621GarfieldAve), Silver Spring, 301-587-5820 [www.cleverdog.net/day\\_care.asp](http://www.cleverdog.net/day_care.asp)

#### ***Puppy Love***

If you feel closer to your dog than to your parents, you're in good company. In a 2006 Pew Research Center study, 94 percent of dog owners described their relationship with their dog as "close" rather than "distant," while close relationships with Mom rated 87 percent—and Dad came in at just 74 percent.