

How to Choose a Dog Walker

Dog walking as a viable profession has grown significantly over the past 15 years. Where it was once considered an after school or casual job to make a bit of extra money, the profession has since evolved to full-time employment, requiring specialized knowledge and training in animal handling, behaviour, business skills and operations or logistics management. In 2012, a casual Facebook group of 6 Toronto-area dog walkers was formed to discuss challenges facing dog walkers and to problem solve and network. At the time of this writing, the GTA group has grown to a membership of 646 dog walkers, currently working full or part time as commercial dog walkers.



Dog walking services can range from large companies with multiple employees, to sole proprietorships owned and run exclusively by one person. Some companies provide only solo dog walks through your neighbourhood while some companies specialize in group excursions to local dog parks. Some businesses invest in private acreage outside of the city where a number of dogs are picked up in the morning, play outdoors all day, and are dropped off at the end of the day. Individual companies will provide different types of service so the first thing to consider is which kind of service is best for your dog.

Large company or sole proprietor?

There are advantages and disadvantages to both kind of services and based on your needs, one type may be more suitable than the other. While some clients may prefer business structure, increased availability and flexibility or services that a larger company with a number of employees may offer, others enjoy a more one-on-one relationship driven approach that many sole proprietorships offer.

What kind of services are available?

Different dog walkers provide different types of services. Typical business models include:

Private neighbourhood walks: This service is considered a premium service and is appropriate for dogs who are not comfortable walking with other dogs in a group or going to dog parks, or who might have other behavioural issues to work through that require a walker's full and undivided attention. Walkers who provide this service walk fewer dogs daily than walkers who provide group service, so expect to pay a higher rate per walk.

Semi-private neighbourhood walks: This service is similar to private walks except your dog may walk with one or two suitable buddies. Often, this service is dependent on the walker having other suitable clients in a geographical location close enough to you to be able to pick up the dogs and complete the walk in a reasonable time frame.



Group neighbourhood walks: This is similar to the semi-private model, but the walker will pick up the maximum number of dogs allowed by their municipality for the walk. In Toronto, dog walkers may walk up to six dogs at a time.

Group adventure style walks: This model usually involves several dogs being picked up in the dog walker's vehicle for a trip to a dog park for off leash play, or to a hiking trail for a leashed trail walk. Dogs joining this type of service must be comfortable riding in the car with other dogs.

In home day care: Some sole proprietors follow a business model that has the walker picking up a number of dogs in the morning and bringing them to their home for a day spent with the walker and the dog's day care friends. Generally, a walk is included in the service unless the dog walker has a large enough yard to allow for a playgroup on property.

Commercial day care: These businesses are brick and mortar type commercial establishments. Most offer pick up or owner drop off options. Dogs in service spend their day playing with other dogs in the day care space while being monitored by day care attendants. Some day cares offer "play all day" service, while others follow a structured program including rest time and supervised play and outings.

What makes a good dog walker?

The service model for individual businesses varies and there is a variety of choice for dog owners looking for some help during the day. Regardless of the model that best suits your needs, there are a few common elements that good dog walkers have in common. Mostly, they are crazy about dogs. Dog walking is physically and mentally challenging so spending an entire day, Monday to Friday and week after week exercising multiple dogs with varying personalities, behavioural quirks and physical needs takes a certain type of individual who loves dogs completely and utterly.

Great dog walkers are also organized, efficient, reliable and hold a strong work ethic. On top of all of that, they need to have the experience and skill to know what dogs can walk with what dogs, they have to be masters of reading canine body language and have advanced dog handling skills, they have to plan their days and routes to make sure they have enough time to get to every client on their schedule that day while planning for contingency, they have to be masters at communication and they have to have solid pre-established guidelines for what to do in case of emergencies. Great dog walkers will also be sure to communicate to clients what their service does and does not entail, and be sure they don't make promises they can't keep. On top of all of that, they have to be competent business owners who keep the administrative process flowing smoothly to ensure their business is healthy.

Questions to ask your potential dog walker

It's important to understand that dog walking is an unregulated industry, so screening your dog walker carefully is important. Here are a few questions to ask your potential dog walker:

1. Who will actually walk your dog?

Some companies are very small, with the sole proprietor serving as the sole dog walker; some might have dozens of walkers. Does the business employ independent contractors or employees? How are they screened?



2. What is the background of the person (or people) who will walk your dog?

How much and what kind of training have they had in dog walking? Have they had any education in canine learning theory, body language, and group walk or playgroup management? Ideally, you want someone with professional training and knowledge and the skill set to implement this knowledge. They should use scientifically sound humane training methods and know how to assess and group dogs for maximum compatibility. They also need to be able to interpret canine body language, handle any issues that arise, take appropriate steps to prevent fights, and have the ability to properly break up a fight if one occurs – or protect your dog in case of an attack by a random dog on the street!

For this reason, during your initial meeting clarify whether you will be assigned a single dog walker for the duration of service or whether the dog walking service retains the right to replace your dog walker on any given day due to illness or scheduling. If you can expect fill-in dog walkers, clarify that they have been screened for the above skills. Some companies will provide you with the option to cancel if your preferred walker is not available and this should be clarified during your initial meet and greet meeting. Your dog walker should outline policies surrounding this clearly so there are no surprises if your dog walker calls in sick or can't walk your dog on any given day.

3. How many dogs do they walk at once?

Walkers may escort a single dog or as many as 6 in the city of Toronto and this varies by municipality. Whether on- or off-leash, each dog added to a group increases the potential for conflict, injuries, lost dogs, and distraction so make sure that your dog is suitable for the service you are hoping to obtain. Expect your walker to ask a number of questions and observe your dog closely during your initial meet and greet. The walker will generally reserve the right to ultimately decide if the dog is a suitable candidate for the service requested.

Remember, the walker has only two eyes, two hands, and two legs. Some cities, counties, and park districts regulate the number of dogs a walker can take out together. Ask for private or semi-private (just your dog and one other compatible dog) outings if your dog is not suitable for or does not enjoy group walks.

4. What is the protocol for screening dogs who will be walked together in groups?

How are they grouped? By age, size, activity level? Because it can be easy for small dogs to be injured by one of their larger buddies, you may wish that your dog is only walked with other dogs about the same size (a good guideline is the 50 percent rule: cohorts should not weigh more than double that of any other one in the group). This is not a hard and fast rule, but responsible dog walkers will consider size ratios when adding new and unknown dogs to an existing group.



5. How will dogs that will be grouped together be introduced?

Introducing new dogs to an established cohort requires skill so it's important to go over how your dog will be introduced and what kind of management methods the walker will employ if the



dogs do not meet well. Not all dogs have good social skills or self-control. Your walker should know how to keep (and be capable of keeping) a group of dogs under control and safe without the use of fear, intimidation, or pain.

6. Where will your dog be walked?

Is the walker familiar with the local rules and regulations? Some areas that allow dogs have specific requirements for dog walking professionals, such as limiting the number of dogs allowed to be handled by one walker. Beware of the dog walker who is not aware of or who disregards municipal dogs off leash rules. In order to obtain pet care insurance, dog walkers must adhere to municipal by-laws regarding off-leash regulations.

7. What kind of activities will your dog be engaged in? On-leash or off-leash?

Your dog shouldn't be allowed off-leash if they don't have a reliable recall, and any new walker should spend at least a few walks with them on-leash before they are allowed off-leash. If your dog doesn't currently have a good recall behaviour, don't despair; a really good walker will have a protocol for both training a recall and for keeping your dog safe until their recall is reliable.

8. How much time do they guarantee on a walk?

Confirm that this time is exercise time and does not include any transportation time. Many dog walkers use GPS and time stamped apps to report to the owner daily on their dog's activities.

9. What equipment does the walker want on your dog?

Some dog walkers prefer to use their own equipment for a variety of reasons. That said, you should not give them permission to use equipment that you do not approve of, or that your dog finds aversive. Ideally, the walker uses your well-fitted equipment, outfitted with secure, up-to-date ID, and you make sure it is in good condition and ready at the door for the walker. Dog walkers who use aversive equipment such as prong collars, harsh leash or physical corrections or electronic collars to control dogs who are unsuitable for the group environment or can't be otherwise controlled should be avoided.

10. Will the person walk your dog in your neighborhood, or transport them elsewhere?

The walker must have an appropriate vehicle, and the dogs inside the vehicle should be safely restrained either with crates or with a sectioned off area to prevent driver distraction. When multiple dogs are being picked up and dropped off during transport, are the dogs left alone in a vehicle, and if so, for how long? (Client dogs should never be left in a vehicle while the walker participates in an interview with a prospective new client, for example. They should be left for only the minute it takes to bring a client's dog back into their own home.) And is the vehicle always securely locked, so that no one could come along and release or steal the dogs inside? If on foot, are dogs secured outside during the pick-up/drop-off process? Tying up dogs and leaving them alone is not an acceptable practice. Your dog walker should assess your property if interviewing for a group walk leashed model to ensure there is a safe place on your property to tether dogs already in service safely within sight of the walker while your dog is being picked up. If that does not exist, are you okay with the walker bringing other dogs into your home? Is your dog okay with that?

11. What kind of incidents has the dog walker encountered?

Have any dogs in care been lost or injured? Safety should be a primary concern. Optimally a walker has been trained in pet first aid and emergency protocols. Walkers should carry a cell phone and have client telephone numbers programmed into it.



What will your walker do if your dog is injured? They should know the location of the emergency clinics in the area as well as your dog's vet and keep a signed veterinary release form on hand in case your dog needs medical attention and you're not available. What will be done with your dog if another dog in the group is injured and requires your walker's full attention? What if the transport vehicle breaks down? If a dog is lost? A natural disaster occurs? What if the walker is injured in service? Is the walker prepared? Good dog walkers will have addressed each of these "what if" questions proactively and have a plan in place should the unthinkable happen.

12. What if your dog walker cannot make it at the scheduled time?

Sometimes sick days or delays are inevitable, but it's a good idea to ask your walker what will happen in that event. Will you be contacted? Is there a back-up walker and if so, are you okay with that walker entering your home? What if I need service at a set appointment time? Can my dog walker accommodate that? It's important to consider the nature of the service, whereupon a dog walker will walk many dogs during the course of the day and will travel from client to client to provide service. Unless you are hiring a company that employs a large number of staff and you have agreed to have different people walking your dog on different days, it's unlikely your dog walker will promise a set pick up time but will offer a window of service instead because unless that walker only walks 3 or 4 dogs a day, which is not profitable, it's impossible to promise set pick up times due to the nature of travel or other delays.

13. Will inclement weather be cause for cancellation?

Is your dog walker familiar with the effects of inclement weather (heat, snow) on dogs and how to take precautions? Some walkers in areas with extreme weather provide alternative services when such conditions are present, such as potty breaks and indoor playtime and/or the use of interactive toys (stuffed Kongs, puzzles). Others provide shortened walks should weather conditions become dangerous. This should be communicated in your initial meet and greet.

14. Will your walker provide a walk report?

Some walkers will leave you a note to let you know how your dog did during the outing as well as any observations or incidents. Others use apps to report back to clients or send daily text messages with pictures.

15. Does your walker provide references?

If so (and they should), check some! Don't skip this important step. If each client you call has concerns about the service, choose another provider.

16. Is the walker licensed, insured, and/or bonded?

Some cities and counties require professional dog walkers to be licensed and/or bonded. Licensing generally refers to having a standard business license, usually issued by the city in which the business exists. Check with your local regulating agencies to see if there are any special regulations for dog walkers.

17. How does the walker gain access to home? Do they keep copies of keys or use a lock box? What happens if keys get lost?

The walker should explain their key policy to prospective clients and be able to outline how keys are labelled and stored. Walkers should also have a lost key policy and be able to explain what steps are taken to protect your home security should that happen. Walkers will also outline key return policies in the event that service is discontinued.



18. Does the walker have a written service contract explaining services and payment policies?

Ideally the service should provide you with a contract to sign. Read it carefully. The contract outlines what the walker does and does not provide in service, as well as important information about cancellations, inclement weather policies, billing policies, emergency procedures, warranties and liability releases.

19. Does the walker like your dog and does your dog like the walker?

Is the walker's interaction with your dog gentle and kind? Does your dog want to interact with the walker? If your dog is normally shy, does the walker respond appropriately?

More considerations

Keep in mind that the outing is for your dog. Above all, they should have a good time and get some exercise. If your dog is older and has health problems, the walk may just be a leisurely sniff and stroll. A good dog walker will assess an individual dog's needs and adjust accordingly. While many walkers have excellent training skills, the outing isn't intended to be a training session; however, a good walker should be able to follow any training protocols you have in place and prevent your dog from developing any bad habits while out and about. Know your dog and communicate what you know to your walker. Teach your dog a strong "leave it" to assist the walker in preventing them from picking up or eating inappropriate or dangerous items while out and about.

Speaking of eating, let your walker know of any dietary restrictions or food allergies. Inform the walker if your dog has been experiencing any changes in behavior or health (limping, lethargy, decreased appetite, etc.).

Always let your walker know if something out of the ordinary has occurred in between walks (a scare or a scuffle with another dog, for example) so they can keep an eye out for any side effects. In turn, listen to your walker if they express concerns about your dog's health or behaviour, or recommends or requests that you hire a trainer or visit your veterinarian. And don't forget to listen to your dog: if you begin to notice that your dog is not happy to see the walker and excited to go with them, it may be time to find a different walker or different type of activity for your dog.

Be aware of your walker's cancellation policy and follow it. Understand that cancelling a scheduled walk has an impact. Walkers who run small businesses can take only a small number of clients at a time and therefore a cancellation can represent a significant impact on their income. Remember, too, that walkers are not on call 24 hours; respect their hours and limit all but emergency calls to the work day.

Lifelong bonds for a happy and healthy dog

At the end of the day, hiring a dog walker is about keeping your dog happy and healthy. A great dog walker, like you, has your dog's best interests at heart and will grow to love your dog as much as you do. They will be delighted to share pictures of your dog being adorable and will want to hear about your dog's successes and challenges. Some client/dog walker relationships span the life of the dog, and a great dog walker can become like a member of the family.

