



How To Choose a Dog Walker



Sadly, dog walking and pet sitting is a fairly unregulated profession. I'm often asked by friends and family "what to look for". The following is my opinion (it is not legal advice and there may be other questions more relevant to your own personal circumstances). It's based on my experience and observations.

I advise my friends and family to inspect the DBS certificate and request a copy of their dog walker's insurance cover sheet.

The following are things I discuss with my friends and family:

1. Get Lots of Information:

- The Pet Industry Federation and the RSPCA came together to produce guidance for dog walkers due to the recent explosion of new dog walking businesses, I think would be useful for dog owners to read this before they interview potential dog walkers. Google "RSPCA Professional Dog Walkers Guidelines".
- Interview at least three dog walkers. Go with the person you feel is best suited to your dog's needs. Think "*K.E.E.P.E.R*"
= *Knowledge. Experience. Empathy. Professionalism. Education. Respect.*

My Top Questions To Ask:

1. "Do you have a limit on the number of dogs you walk at a time?"
2. "Who else will my dog be walked with?" (i.e are they always the same dogs?).
3. "How do you match her to a group?"
4. "Where will you walk him?"
5. "Do you meet up with other dog walkers?"
6. "How long will she be in your van for?". (this is important, it will inform you of how long your dog should be out of the house for).
7. "How is my dog transported?". (car/van? crated/seat-harness/loose?) Dogs should NEVER be tied up by their lead (or anything else) in any vehicle.
8. "Can I see inside your vehicle?". Look for anti-slip mats, look for an absence of towels/blankets (unless changed for each dog these become a potential source of disease and infection). Is there enough space for each dog to be injury/stress free? Look for a first aid kit, air-conditioning, protection from the sun, basic hygiene, water.
9. "What do you do when you come across members of the public?"
10. "What would you do if you came across an aggressive dog? An unaccompanied dog?". (A professional dog walker should perform risk assessments).
11. "How long have you been in business for?"
12. "What is your dog-related background?"
13. "What do you do when a dog doesn't do what you want?". (Does it align with how you interact with your dog?).
14. What equipment do you use? (flexi-leads can pose a hazard, especially in a group setting).

2. Professional Membership.

- There is no legal requirement for dog walkers to join any over-seeing organisations.
- If your dog walker has voluntarily joined a professional organisation it means they ought to be aware of, and signed up to, professional dog walking codes of conduct.
- Not all organisations are the same. Some restrict the numbers of dogs on each walk, some don't. Some monitor their walkers social media to check compliance, some don't. Some require extra verification before allowing membership, some don't.
- Membership of a professional organisation should mean that you complete/receive all the necessary information and forms that are necessary for the safety of your dog, your home/keys, your data etc.
- It will mean that you have someone official to lodge a complaint with should the need arise.
- Your dog walker will be able to stay up to date with any new legislation and skills.

3. Choose Someone with Knowledge and Suitable Experience.

- A dog walker should gain experience of dog walking before offering their services professionally. Have they volunteered with rescue organisations? This will ensure they receive the correct guidance and experience when working with dogs of different temperaments, sizes, body language etc. Inexperienced dog walkers should initially be engaged for individual/single household walks of well-rounded dogs.
- Puppy walks and group walks are best left to experienced dog walkers. It's a big responsibility to be in charge of socialising a puppy to help establish a well-rounded dog. Group walks are an entirely different dynamic and require skilful, active management.
- **Choose a dog walker who has the right level of experience for the needs of your dog.**
- A dog walker should have extensive knowledge of everything "dog". With the caveat that every dog is an individual, at a minimum, your dog walker should research your dog breed's exercise requirements (age/development appropriate), health predispositions, baseline temperament and characteristics. The new crossbreeds present a challenge but knowledge of parentage should help with this.
- Knowledge is vital for anyone engaged in puppy services. For example, mistakes from over-exercising puppies are often not seen in the early years, instead they create problems for the dog as he/she ages. Your dog walker should understand the risks of different types of toy play and over-exercising. Your vet can advise you.
- Are they suitably qualified to offer a particular service? For example, puppy socialisation and training is often a service offered by dog walkers. Get clarity about what they are providing. For me, this is specialist service.



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- A dog walker should also have knowledge of the signs and symptoms of major canine infectious diseases and knowledge of the life cycle, signs and symptoms of parasites. The importance of this knowledge should not be underestimated, it can prevent the spread of disease and parasites to other dogs (and yourself in some cases!!!!)
- Legal knowledge: to ensure the safety of your dog, the safety of those around them and the environment they are in.
- Basic dog knowledge: what a dog is and what it isn't (i.e they aren't wolves), how they learn etc.
- Canine body language awareness: your dog walker should be able to recognise postures, gestures, facial expressions, vocalisations etc associated with different emotional states. Your dog walker should be able to recognise the more subtle signs. This helps to ensure your dog is "heard" and responded to appropriately.
- Canine first aid knowledge; your dog walker isn't a vet or a veterinary nurse but they should have knowledge and a kit to try to assist your dog in an emergency or accident.

4. Choose Someone you can Trust and Talk To:

- It is vital that you can trust your dog walker to talk to you in an professional and open way. Your dog walker ought to be able to tell you the great news and, the not so good news. If you dog walker tells you the walk was fantastic it's very likely it would have been. However, every now and again they need to tell you something else. They should tell you:
 1. Behaviour: if they finding a certain aspect of your dog's behaviour challenging, a little bit odd or if there's been a change in behaviour (e.g. started barking at other dogs, a change in recall, becoming easily startled or over-aroused).
 2. Health, welfare or safety: "she is eating other dog's poo" (it happens!), "she got frightened by the sound of a firework" or "his poos were quite loose today" (yes, I do know each individual dogs typical poo and frequency!). Changes in gait/movement/ability "I noticed he didn't seem to want to run around as much as normal" "She gets up stiffly when I come to collect her", skin/coat condition etc.
 3. When it is not advisable to walk your dog, i.e. for certain breeds, the compromised and the elderly it is best not to walk in soaring temperatures. Sometimes, staying at home is the safe option.
 4. Injuries/knocks/fall/trips etc: Once in a blue moon a dog will bump into a tree when running, skid, trip or snag themselves on a branch (snagging is more common with thin skinned breeds such as Whippets/Greyhounds), and this will result in an injury (a dog walker will feel truly dreadful on the odd occasion this happens). Your dog walker must give you a full account of any injury and seek treatment in your absence if necessary.
- **p.s Remember communication works both ways:** Be sure to inform your dog walker about anything important that has happened in your care. This will help your dog walker uphold the health and well-being of your dog when you aren't there.