

# Policies and Practices for Allowing Pets at Camp

There's no doubt that pets at camp can be a value-add and a fun part of the culture. However, they also present significant risks. From creating challenges for campers with allergies, to potential behavioral issues, it can be hard to predict exactly how animals will impact the camp environment. In fact, even animals that are well-behaved at home may exhibit different behaviors when surrounded by new people or different stimuli.

According to Meredith Stewart, a Redwoods Consultant and former camp director, it's also important to be clear-eyed about any potential biases we as camp leadership may have:

*"When I was a Camp Director, my big mixed-breed Labrador named Tanner would always accompany me to camp each summer. Of course, because he was mine, I thought he was perfect. Handsome, big, friendly, gentle, and loving. The truth is he was also curious, didn't have a perfect recall, and tipped over trash cans whenever he got a whiff of leftovers from last nights' cookout."*

The potential for favoritism is just one reason why it's important to develop a robust pet policy for your camp. First of all, you'll need to decide whether pets—meaning any animals not specifically dedicated as service animals\*—are allowed at all.

## It's Ok to Have No Pet Policies

There is no rule saying you have to allow pets. No pet policies may simply state that no pets are allowed at all. If you decide to implement such a policy, it's important to communicate to staff that adding a pet mid-contract, or sneaking in an animal, may be a breach of contract and could lead to losing housing and/or employment.

## Making the Decision to Allow Pets

If you *are* interested in allowing pets at your camp, below are a few things to consider when making that initial decision:

1. **Clearly define what a *pet* is for your camp.** Are horses pets or livestock? Will you allow only certain sizes or breeds of dogs? Will you allow snakes or rodents? Consider allergies, potential diseases, and safety, in your decisions.
2. **Limit the number of pets allowed.** Consider the state and local permitting requirements for your area regarding livestock and exotic pets.
3. **Research your local restrictions regarding breeds.** Breed restrictions generally ban breeds considered potentially "dangerous". Some types and breeds may not be appropriate for camp, or a facility that centers on the safety of children, or houses other animals for programs (horses or livestock for example). Consult your insurance carrier, as they may have limitations on breeds.
4. **Consider pet weight.** Sometimes this is a subtle way of ruling out certain breeds without putting in a specific breed restriction. It may also be an important factor at your camp due to the size of the housing units, space, etc.
5. **Determine if you can adequately exercise your pets.** Exercised animals are healthier and better behaved. Yet the nature of camp is often a rigorous 24-hour schedule of responsibilities. If it is not

possible for pet owners to adequately care for and exercise their pets due to time constraints, then pets may not be appropriate for your camp.

### Considerations if You Do Allow Pets

If you do end up deciding to allow pets and create a pet policy, then your policies will also need to cover some very specific details about how pets are managed at camp. The clearer you are, the less likely you are to run into trouble later on. The key here is to make sure that owners not only see and sign these policies, but that they are clearly communicated and understood as a condition of their employment. Below are some items to consider:

1. **Require pet interviews or a designated trial period**, in which you test out whether a pet is a good fit for the camp. A designated trial period allows for evaluation and consideration—both for the camp and the pet owner—about whether the pet is a good fit for your camp. Importantly, it means any decision will be based on the animal's real-world behaviors, not their owners' expectations or promises.
2. **Pets should be up to date on vaccines, licenses and tags.** All pets, even those that are not going to be interacting with other animals or people, should be current on their shots and any locally required licenses or tags. Dogs and cats should have a collar that also shows proof of ownership and a registration tag. Proof of vaccinations should be required. And you should consider whether or not animals should be spayed or neutered, based on veterinarian recommendations of the age and breed of the animal.
3. **Leash requirements will need to be clear.** If you allow off-leash dogs or off-leash times at camp, make those clear. Consider the type and length of the leash. Will you allow unattended pets at your camp? What about the free-roaming camp dog that greets at the office or follows along on trail rides? Decide your limitations and communicate clear expectations.
4. **Allocate specific times of day for pet owners to exercise and care for their animals**, making sure that they are not unfairly burdening those staff who do not have pets.
5. **Be clear about how pets are to be safely contained** in housing units. Examples: Reptiles are to be kept in contained cages or structures appropriate for their type or breed. Dogs are to be kept in closed rooms, or potentially a crate, when the owner is not in the housing unit to supervise.
6. **Be aware of noise restrictions and expectations** around the noise that often comes with pets. It will be important to communicate expectations about what constitutes tolerable levels of pet noise in your camp's communal living environment.
7. **Aggressive behavior should not be tolerated.** Make behavior expectations and limitations clear, and then hold to this standard each and every time. Pets that show behavior that is protective, unfriendly, or not safe for others should not be permitted.
8. **Set clear expectations regarding animal waste.** Living in shared housing or the communal living environment of camp requires tight regulation regarding animal waste and odors. Require pet owners to pick up waste right away and dispose of it in designated bins. Walk dogs away from buildings and living quarters.
9. **Decide if there will be additional fees associated with having pets.** If there is damage, or cleaning expenses, will there be a fee levied on the pet owner? Having a deposit for pets at camp can also be a more upfront way of addressing this potential concern.
10. **Mark certain areas of camp as off limits.** Some areas of camp are not appropriate for pets and should be marked as clearly off limits. These may include dining and eating facilities, kitchens and

food preparation areas, health clinics and medical areas, or housing areas that are not their owners'. Follow Health Department Codes regarding dogs swimming in the camp pool or waterfront. Aquatic program spaces, especially pools, are not safe areas for pets and may be against health department guidelines and code.

11. **If you allow dogs, create a policy and emergency action plan regarding a pet bite**, even if you do not anticipate that happening. Consider your local laws regarding dog bites. The policy should also define liability. In most states, owners are held liable if their dog bites someone. Your policy should be clear regarding owner liability. Be clear that if a pet is harmed at camp, or harms someone, or another animal, the owner will be held responsible financially and will likely be asked to remove the animal permanently from the camp.
12. **Consider if a pet is harmed or injured at camp**. If someone's pet is injured at camp, make it clear that the safety and health of the pet is the responsibility of the owner, in all circumstances.
13. **Communicate to pet owners that they will need a backup plan**. That plan will be important in case a trial period is not successful, or if there is cause to believe the animal is a safety concern to anyone anytime.
14. **Seek local, expert counsel**. Each state and county has different laws that affect pet ownership, as does each insurance carrier. And there may be liability issues for the camp, even if you ask owners to sign policies acknowledging their responsibilities. Camps should consult with local resources and counsel, as well as their insurance carrier, to understand local laws and regulations, as well as insurance requirements.
15. **Add an addendum to your housing policy** for all staff (and volunteers) that live at camp that clearly states expectations about whether pets are allowed and, if they are, what your expectations are about how those pets will be managed.

## Final Thoughts

The American Kennel Club offers a training and certification for dogs and their owners teaching the basics of dog training and the mastery of some obedience skills, which Meredith Stewart would often recommend to dog owners wanting to bring their pet to camp:

*"I recommend that camp dogs complete the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) training and assessment from the AKC in preparation for camp life. But it is not a silver bullet. The most important thing is to first decide if pets are a good fit for your camp, and if you will allow this addition to your risk and liability bucket. Pet owners should review and sign your written policy before arrival at camp."*

Despite all the rules and considerations, Meredith Stewart says that it is also important to remember that pets can be a great addition to camp culture, as long as they are managed appropriately. As a proof point, she recalls her own slightly rambunctious but much-loved camp dog:

*"Tanner had his own camp nametag and enthusiastically greeted the UPS driver daily. He was often found in the maintenance shop napping on the cool concrete floor. In some circumstances when a behavior concern popped up, or a camper's homesickness peeked in, Tanner was just what we needed. He would sidle up next to a sad camper and provide some comfort and a soft place to lay their head for a bit of quiet time. Although not perfectly trained, he was well mannered and well suited for life as the gentle camp dog."*

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**\*A Note on Service Animals:** Service animals are trained for distinct jobs that assist the individual with daily living. Service animals are an accommodation for a person with disabilities to assist them with the management of their disability. The Americans with Disabilities Act states that you may not prohibit a service animal from living in housing with an employee (or volunteer/participant), and you also are not allowed to charge a pet deposit for a service animal. Emotional Support and Therapy Animals are pets and do not have the same protections. An individual that is disabled is not required to disclose their disability. Each state has different laws regarding Service Animals and Emotional Support Animals. *Consult local counsel or local disability rights organizations to understand the laws in your area.*