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DIVERSIONS

Day care gone to the dogs

Furry children need social outlet, too

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Rosie's friends are happily chasing her around the daycare yard, each determined to snatch away her cool toy.

With her buddies Lance and Maggie at her heels, Rosie races by the plastic slide and darts past the tunnel before she is cornered by the fence.

The others move in for some good-natured roughhousing.

The wrestling match breaks up before the daycare staff have to intervene and the pals run off to pursue another game.

Just a typical day at a daycare centre where the friends enjoy play time, potty breaks, meals and snacks, afternoon naps and a time-out room for anyone who gets a little too rambunctious or just needs some quiet time.

Except this isn't your typical clientele.

The "children" at Newmarket's K9 to 5 Doggie Daycare, Training and Activity Centre are the four-legged variety.

"They're kids with fur," said owner Vernessa Wysocki, a graduate of Cynology College, an on-line program with courses in dog psychology, behaviour and training.

Like kids, she argues, dogs need to interact with friends.

"I guess the alternative (to daycare) is for your dog to be left at home alone while you work and your kids go to school. Dogs can bark all day from separation anxiety," said Ms Wysocki, adding one of her clients' favourite activities is chasing soap bubbles she and her staff blow for them.

Instead, they can come here and socialize, which is one of the most important things you can do for your dog. And, at the end of the day, they're going home tired.

From day care and spa treatments to organic food and big box stores offering trendy merchandise, people are pampering their

pets these days like never before.

According to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, pet owners in the U.S. alone spent \$30 billion last year on products for Fido, Fluffy and other furry, feathered and reptilian friends.

That's an astounding 28 per cent increase from 1998.

Vet bills eat up the single largest chunk of change, followed by food.

But supplies and gadgets are the fastest-growing area of pet expenditures — not surprising, since 62 per cent of U.S. households now have a pet, compared to 57 per cent in 1990.

For generations, people tended to see the role of animals as purely functional.

Cats were kept around for catching mice and dogs' duties ranged from herding sheep to retrieving the kill on hunting trips.

Any other animal had better produce eggs, milk or some other food if it didn't want to end up on a dinner plate.

But these days, animals are

nearer and dearer to us than ever before, according to Bruno Caldarelli, owner of Pet Valu in Maple.

"Nowadays, pets are not considered pets. They're part of the family. People will do whatever they need to do to make them happy and confident," he said.

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"For a lot of people, these animals are their grandkids or children. You can see people have a soft spot in their hearts for these pets."

But Mr. Caldarelli argues as much as people give their pets — he acknowledges the sky's the limit

for some owners — they get more in return.

"Pets make people's lives more enjoyable. Studies show they reduce stress and they're great companions. They don't argue. You just come home at the end of the day and they love you no matter what."

He said pet owners will come in to his store ready to spend anything from 99 cents for a plastic toy to \$150 for a kitty townhouse.

Owners who drop off their dogs at K9 to 5 shell out \$25 for a full-day's care and \$15 for a half-day. Buying five-, 10- or 20-day passes saves money in the long run.

Ms Wysocki also offers training classes, ranging from puppy kindergarten to advanced dog obedience. All classes feature "humane, dog-friendly techniques."

The entire family is encouraged to participate in their dogs' training.

"One client said this (centre) will be her dog's home away from home because she's bringing her

dog for day care and training," Ms Wysocki said.

However, doggie daycare centres and pet shops aren't the only spots where York Region pet owners can turn to get the latest and greatest products and services.

Pet websites are the latest way for owners to check out must-have items.

York-based infopet.ca sells cat tents in light blue denim or a "sweet dreams" motif for \$35. The denim tent comes with an orthopedic foam bed and sheep boa cover, while sweet dreams comes with a sponge bed and "unreal" sheepskin pad.

Canine couches and cat napper beds range in price from \$90 to \$170.

Pets can also enjoy a wide range of bath products, from shampoos and conditioners to detanglers and deodorizing body sprays.

If your pooch likes the outdoors, why not pick up some Outward Hound travel gear such as

See WEBSITE, page 20.



Vernessa Wysocki and some of her doggie daycare crew at K9 to 5 Doggie Daycare.

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