Dogs Playing for Life™
DOGS LIVE TO PLAY. NOW LET THEM PLAY TO LIVE!
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"When we show pictures of our dog play groups on Facebook, people often think the photos were taken at a dog park. When we tell them that the dogs are all shelter dogs that are or will be available for adoption, they can't believe it. Adopters have been coming in because one of the dogs in a play group photo on Facebook catches their eye."

~ Director of Operations of Fairfax County Animal Shelter, Kristen Auerbach

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Dogs Playing for Life™

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CONTENTS

1 Introduction to Dogs Playing for Life!™ from founder Aimee Sadler 1

2 The Benefits of Play Groups 9

3 Testimonials 17

4 Basic Guidelines 27

5 Choosing Candidates for Play Groups 37

6 Leadership Roles and Handling Techniques 43

7 Understanding Play Styles 53

8 When and How to Use Interruptions and Corrections 63

9 Safety Equipment 75

10 Social Status, Tolerance, and Aggression 81

11 Understanding Dog Fights 91

12 Information for Adopters 97

13 A Holistic, Sustainable Program 103

14 Resources and Continuing Education 109

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1

INTRODUCTION TO DOGS PLAYING FOR LIFE!™

INTRODUCTION TO DOGS PLAYING FOR LIFE!™

Sometimes it's hard for me to believe that I get to travel around the country and teach shelters how to let their dogs play. I began in sheltering as a private dog trainer hired to work with the dogs at the local, municipal shelter in Southampton, NY. I recognized quickly that efficiency was critical if I was to use my allocated time to help the most dogs cope better and get adopted. At that time I didn't understand the greater impact of play groups, but I did recognize that getting twenty dogs out of their kennels in an hour was better than only four.

I had always been comfortable with dogs in large groups. I was raised on a farm and we rescued many dogs, having up to seventeen at one time. When I began working at the shelter it seemed logical to me that allowing the dogs to play and socialize in the yard first would better prepare them for their manners and basic training lessons with me. Through play groups they could expend excess energy in a healthy and interactive way that countered the common anxiety and frustration caused by life in a noisy, uncomfortable, and stressful kennel. My task was to teach them to behave in an appealing and attractive way for volunteers and adopters. Playgroups quickly became the foundation of this work.

To my surprise, shelter dogs having social access to one another still raises concerns revolving around safety, behavioral, and health risks. As a result, social isolation has been the industry norm for both dogs and cats for far too long.

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The reasons described to me, at shelters of varying capacity and missions, are somewhat consistent:

"This is the way we've always done it…"

"The dogs might fight…"

"We might get an outbreak of _____…"

"We need to keep our volunteers safe…"

"We don't have anyone qualified to let dogs play…"

"We don't have the time or personnel to get the dogs out every day…"

In my experience, this limited reasoning could pertain to all kinds of enrichment, training, or behavior programs that are typically found in shelters. Most importantly, the above reasons do not serve the best interests of the animals.

Consider the role that animal welfare organizations play in our communities. A thriving organization does the following:

- Functions as a safe haven for lost and surrendered companion animals.
- Provides any and all available resources to maintain the medical and behavioral health of sheltered animals.
- Works to save as many animal lives as possible.
- Provides education to the public in order to affect long lasting positive change.

What that looks like in each organization will vary, because resources vary. Each shelter or rescue — open admission and limited admission shelters, municipal animal control services, sanctuaries, etc. — will function in a different capacity. Every organization has its own unique challenges and access to resources such as finances, space, facilities, staff, time, and volunteers.

So while there is no "one size fits all" program, it's also true that no matter what type of organization or what the available resources may be, play groups

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can be incorporated on some level. Play groups can help your organization achieve all of the above and help you serve the best interests of the animals while they are in your care.

The exciting outcome from shelters that are already implementing daily play groups are reports that their initial concerns did not come to fruition. They report happier, satisfied animals that are generally less stressed. This equates to less disease and a decrease in extreme behavior that puts people and animals at risk. Subsequently, shelter animals and the people who care for them are safer due to the implementation of play groups. And that helps increase adoptions and saves more lives.

Dogs Playing for Life!™ stresses the consideration of the whole animal: physically, emotionally and behaviorally. Offering a more natural environment and comprehensive approach to the care of shelter animals helps organizations to better assess behavior, maintain healthy behavior, and support better adoption matches.

We have presented the Dogs Playing for Life!™ seminar at animal welfare conferences and to over 50 shelters internationally. The three primary open admission shelters that have implemented the Dogs Playing for Life!™ program in its entirety now maintain a canine live release rate in excess of 95%!

Animal welfare as an industry is constantly evolving. Our critical tasks at hand change from year to year. Organizations, their volunteers, and animals are clearly benefiting from the newest trends, as is demonstrated by an overall reduction of euthanasia rates and less discriminatory practices.

In the end, this is our primary role as humane societies; to provide care and a safe haven for all companion animals (no matter their shape, size or color) and support them into loving homes. Implementing daily play groups has proven to be a win-win for people and animals!

And to think that these exciting lifesaving outcomes revolve around something so simple and natural: ***let dogs be dogs and allow them to play together.***

Aimee Sadler
October 2014
Founder Dogs Playing for Life!™

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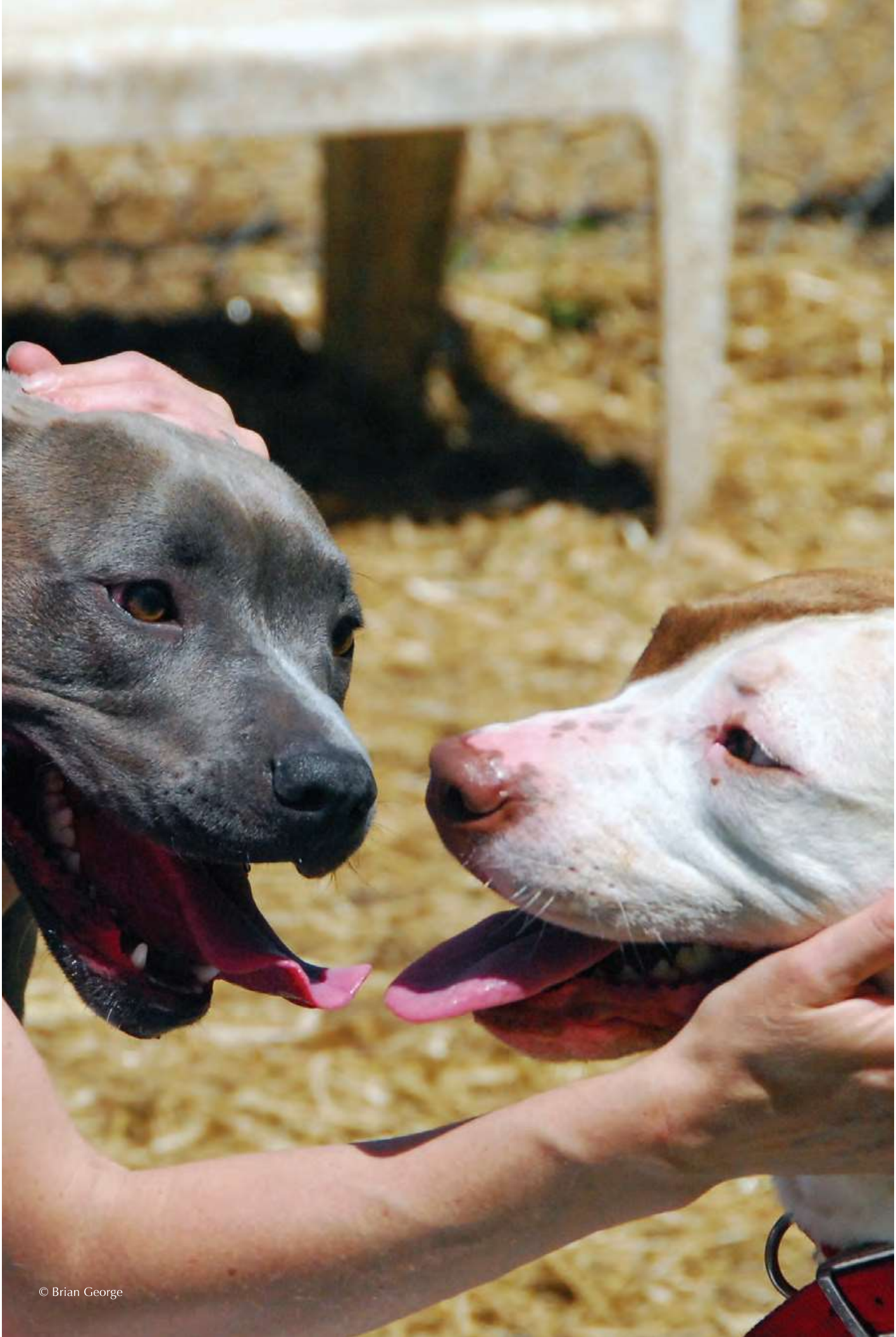
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2

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY GROUPS

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY GROUPS

In addition to exercise and social interactions, play groups provide opportunities for enrichment, assessment, training, and behavior modification. The benefits of daily play groups include:

MORE ACCURATE ASSESSMENTS

Play groups help determine social skills more accurately

Evaluating dogs for inclusion in play groups and observing them interacting with one another will give staff a better, faster understanding of the dogs in their care. Staff will learn that a dog's behavior on-leash or in their kennel (such as leash reactivity and barrier reactivity) is not an accurate indicator of a dog's social skills. A dog that may be labeled aggressive because of kennel behavior may exhibit healthy social skills in play group.

INCREASED FREEDOM and REDUCED STRESS

Play groups support physical and mental health

During play groups dogs burn off physical energy and, due to the intensive social interactions, they burn mental energy as well. This type of interaction feeds their senses and supports their overall health. Spending time off-leash and out of their kennels reduces stress and allows them to relax in and outside of the runs.

MAXIMIZED RESOURCES

Play groups make the most of every moment

In shelters, every second counts. Play groups can provide the fastest way to attend to the largest number of dogs in the shortest amount of time. Rather than only handling the dogs one at a time, two people can attend to many dogs at one time. If dogs need to be removed from their kennels for cleaning, they can be brought out to play groups, instead of being tethered or crated. Empty kennels are cleaned more humanely, efficiently and effectively. Once the dogs are returned to their kennels, they have had ample time to exercise and relieve themselves, which translates into fewer cleanups for the staff to perform later on.

For example:

At the Southampton Animal Shelter they average 60 dogs in play groups (with each dog receiving approximately thirty minutes of play time) in just 2.5 hours every morning. That thirty minute play session with other dogs can be the equivalent to a two hour leash walk.

At Indianapolis Animal Care and Control, cleaning time was dramatically reduced when play groups were demonstrated during the DPFL seminar. When full, the kennels typically took 3-6 hours to clean. During play groups the kennels were cleaned in just 1.5 hours.

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BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

Play groups can support better behavior in and out of the kennels

Maintaining the mental and behavioral health of dogs in shelters is vital to preserving their general health and condition. Playgroups can lead to a reduction in fear, anxiety, and aggression, as well barrier reactivity and on-leash reactivity. Healthy contact with other dogs can reduce the perception of threat and increase social skills among dogs. Stress relief during playgroups can also lead to safer, more positive dog-human interaction.

TRAINING PROGRESS

Play groups provide training support

Allowing dogs to participate in play groups can lead to higher receptivity during standard manners and/or basic obedience training sessions. Without the species appropriate outlet of play groups, many shelter dogs struggle to learn. Playing allows them to burn off mental and physical energy so they

can concentrate on learning. For some dog-dog issues, socially healthy dogs can be more effective trainers than humans. Dogs are often excellent teachers for other dogs.

A MORE NATURAL, CALM ENVIRONMENT

Play groups lower isolation and stress in the kennels

Rather than keeping dogs isolated from one another, play groups allow dogs to interact and bond with other dogs. Since dogs are accustomed to living in groups, this social time with other dogs can minimize behavioral deterioration, speed up behavior modification, and create more peaceful kennels by facilitating a more natural situation.

After time to play together dogs generally cohabitate in a kennel more easily. They've gotten a chance to meet their "neighbors", which removes some of the novelty and frustration of being kept apart in kennels.

After playgroup, dogs are more relaxed, which reduces jumping, barking, and barrier reactivity. Kennels are calmer and quieter overall which is good for the dogs, the staff, and the potential adopters!

BETTER ADOPTIONS

Play groups give everyone a chance to get to know each other

Playgroups help to make better matches with adopters by allowing observers to gather relevant, helpful information about the dogs. In particular, it helps staff, volunteers, and rescue partners learn more about the social skills of each dog, which in turn, helps them speak more confidently and accurately about the dogs to adopters. If play groups are open to the public for viewing, adopters can see the dogs' personalities shine through. The time spent socializing in playgroups also paves the way for more positive interactions with adopter's current dogs. Meet and greets with the current dogs are less stressful and safer overall.

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"When they're out in play group, it's great stimulation for them physically and mentally. So when they're back in the kennel in their cages, their cage behavior is just really improved. The better behaved they are in the cage, the better their chances are of getting adopted."

~ Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter (BARCS)
Brian George, animal care attendant/enrichment coordinator

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3

TESTIMONIALS

TESTIMONIALS

BERNICE CLIFFORD
Training and Behavior Director
Animal Farm Foundation

"Socializing the dogs in groups provides both mental and physical stimulation for the dogs. When the dogs are satisfied this way, their stress levels go down and they show better in their kennels. Dogs who show better go home faster. Play groups also help the staff and volunteers get to know the dogs better and, therefore, can make better dog-dog and family matches."

© Animal Farm Foundation

CYNTHIA BATHURST
Executive Director
Safe Humane Chicago
Court Case Dog Program at
Chicago Animal Care and Control

"Dogs in playgroups find rescue or adopters faster than those who are not. It has forever changed our assessments and shortened lengths of stay for dogs at Chicago Animal Care and Control (CACC), and it has definitely improved the quality of dogs' lives in the shelter.

For the Court Case Dog Program, in which dogs who have been impounded because of the misdeeds of their previous owners, the placement rate for dogs increased 60% in the year in which we instituted playgroups over the prior year. Alongside other resources we developed the average length of stay for Court Case Dogs decreased by 40% over the first year in which we instituted playgroups. One of the members of the adoption team at Chicago Animal Care and Control who tracks adoptions noted recently that available dogs who had been assessed and integrated into playgroups were adopted an average of twenty days faster than dogs who could not be integrated into routine playgroups."

DEBRA CALANDRILLO
Volunteer
Rochester Animal Services

"In addition to other benefits, our dogs are more receptive to training and behavior work which directly correlates to increased adoptions and better adoption placement matches. We now know more about each individual dog after observing them in play group, which provides us with valuable information that allows us to better support their individual needs.

…we didn't anticipate the huge cultural shift that has occurred organizationally. Staff, volunteers and leadership are so supportive of the program. We believe that shelter dog play groups and The Play Yard at Rochester Animal Services is fundamentally changing how the public perceives shelter pets. It truly has been a transformational experience.

There is more collaboration between staff and volunteers. While we are still using behavioral evaluations as an assessment tool; our play group team is frequently called on by staff members to introduce a dog to play group who may have been marginal or failed their dog-dog assessment. In each case where the play group team has been consulted, the dog has found success in the play yard and has been moved up to adoption row.

Non-play group eligible dogs (while rare); are benefitting from additional support as play groups offers us an efficient means to meet the mental and

physical needs of the majority of our dogs, thereby freeing up resources to offer more individualized care and support for those who need it.

We have made a commitment to marketing and promoting our play groups within our community. We post the weekly play group schedule via social media and we are committed to sharing photos and videos of play yard escapades to help build our brand. With many people expressing hesitation about viewing animals in a shelter environment, shelter dog play provides us with yet another option to capture and engage potential adopters. It is powerful stuff."

© Liz Kowaluk/The Play Yard at Rochester Animal Services

BRENT TOELLNER
President
Kansas City Pet Project

"Implementing the playgroup program has been a literal life-saver for our shelter. Now, each day, all of our available dogs (more than 100 daily) are given 30+ minutes in playgroups. During this time they get to socialize with other dogs, burn off excess energy, and get necessary physical and mental stimulation.

The results have been amazing. Through the playgroups, we are now better able to determine how dogs will really react when introduced to other dogs – causing many that had previously been labeled as "dog aggressive" to lose the label for a more accurate description of their socialness. Our staff gains a better understanding of the dogs' behavior – which also helps us to make better adoption matches and to better prepare adopters for handling the behaviors of a particular pet.

However, the biggest gain from playgroups has been the noise/arousal level in the kennels. Prior to playgroups, the shelter was incredibly loud. Every time a person or dog would walk down the aisle, dogs would bark and often jump against kennel doors. Many displayed signs of barrier aggression. This created a very uncomfortable environment not only for the dogs and staff, but for potential adopters as well.

Now, the kennels are much quieter and dogs are more inclined to be well-behaved or asleep. It's great to hear from people who haven't visited the shelter in a while, comment about how relaxed our dogs are or how quiet the kennels seem. The difference is very noticeable and helps a more customer-friendly adoption experience."

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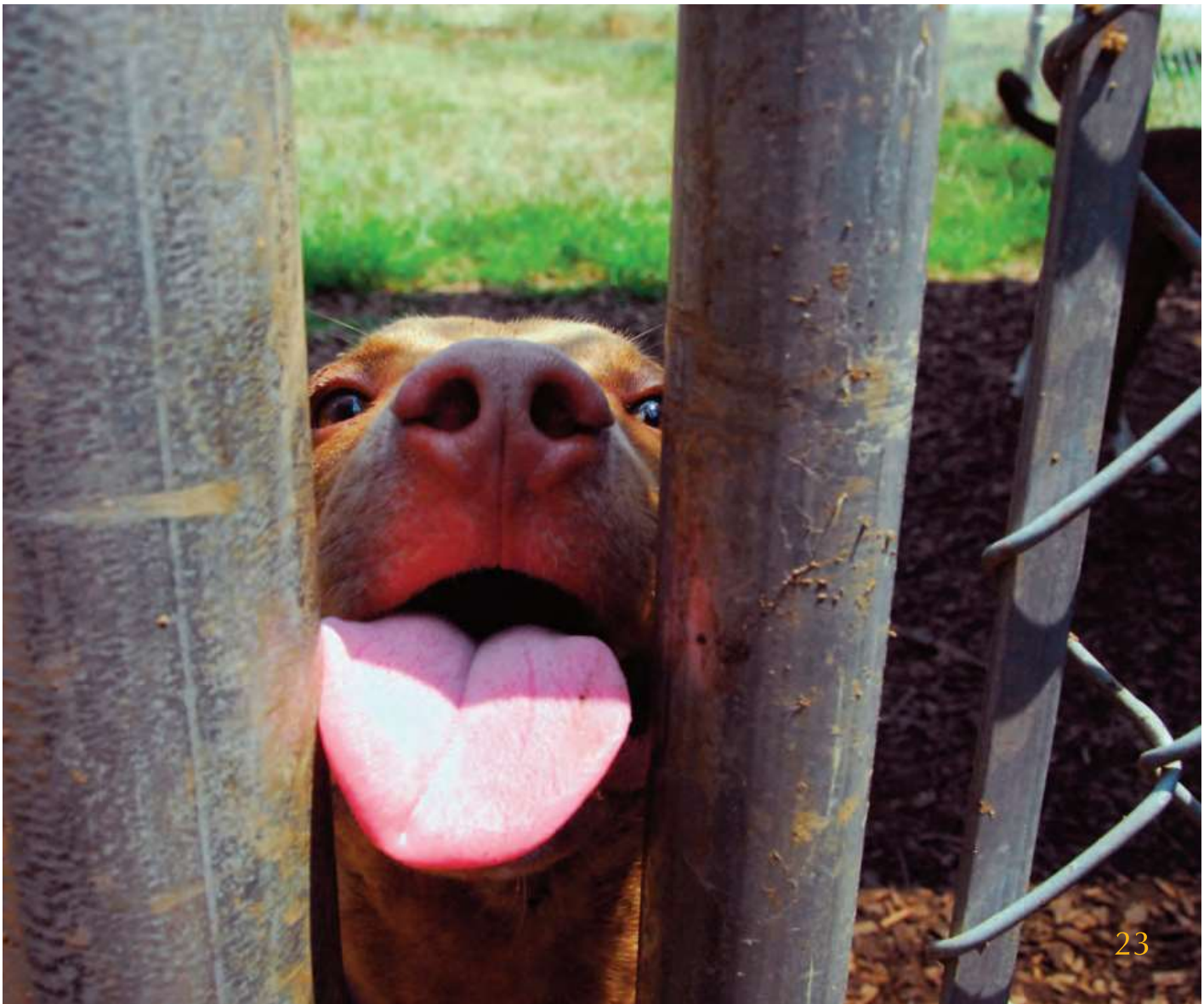

KRISTEN AUERBACH
Director of Communications and Outreach
Fairfax County Animal Shelter

"Six surprising ways that 'Dogs Playing for Life' has changed life for dogs and people at Fairfax County Animal Shelter:

- The kennels really are quieter. Not only that, staff and volunteers keep remarking that the dog kennels 'feel' different. The dogs are calmer, less stressed, and every time they come out of their kennels, they look expectantly at the door, hoping it's play group time. There is less barrier reactive behavior in the kennels. Even when the dogs are excited, they are bouncy and exuberant instead of anxious and stressed.

- Potential adopters are joining the fun. We invite potential adopters outside to watch play groups. Our visitors have so much fun that they stay for a long time and sometimes even ask if they can help! They request chairs and call their family members to come and watch. Many of them adopt dogs right out of play group!

- Nearly all of our dogs that 'failed' the dog-to-dog portion of the behavior evaluation do great in play groups. The Dogs Playing for Life seminar showed us how to safely introduce new dogs, even ones that we think might have aggression issues. Now we are able to tell the difference between dogs that might be leash reactive and those

that are actually aggressive with other dogs. Our assessments are more accurate because we are able to see our dogs play with lots of other dogs and can see how they respond in different situations.

- Play groups have provided leadership opportunities for our staff. Animal caretakers' who previously just 'did their job' of cleaning and feeding have felt empowered by leading play group sessions. We have learned so much about our caretakers' talents and abilities that we never knew before. Staff members are happier and more energized than we've ever seen them before. One longtime staff member remarked, "I couldn't sleep last night because I was so excited about leading play groups today."

- Our dog enrichment volunteers are inspired. We have a large volunteer program, and many of our volunteers didn't know what to do with the dogs besides walk them and throw a tennis ball. A lot of the dogs would just stand around in the exercise pen, looking bored. Since we started play groups, the volunteers have seen how different the dogs are when they are truly receiving enrichment and they're looking for new ways to make shelter dogs' lives more fun and exciting.

- Social media success. When we show pictures of our dog play groups on Facebook, people often think the photos were taken at a dog park. When we tell them that the dogs are all shelter dogs that are or will be available for adoption, they can't believe it. Adopters have been coming in because one of the dogs in a play group photo on Facebook catches their eye.

© Liz Kowaluk/The Play Yard at Rochester Animal Services

4

BASIC GUIDELINES

BASIC GUIDELINES

In the following chapters, we'll take a look at the basic strategies, principles of learning, personality and play styles of dogs, as well as handler skills and techniques. Please note that these are general guidelines. There is no specific formula that will result in perfect play groups every time.

That's because there are two major variables involved in every play group, at every organization: the dogs and the humans. The individuals involved will each bring their own sets of skills, experiences, and comfort levels for play and this will influence and alter the course of interactions. Think of it like this: Play groups are not a computer you can program with exact specifications. Instead, play groups are more like an organic living, breathing organism – always changing in response to internal and external influences.

© Brian George

With that in mind, the following chapters are general guidelines that will help any organization begin a successful Dogs Playing for Life!™ (DPFL) program. Here are the program basics:

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Play groups should take place in a secure yard. While play groups are possible in a variety of yard types, the following is the ideal set up for the DPFL program:

- Multiple yards that are connected to one another are preferable to a single, large yard.
- Catch pens at every entrance. These are secure gated areas outside of each entrance point. Otherwise known as "air locks".
- Gates that swing both ways. If gates are hung next to a side wall, the hinges should be on the same side as the wall. This allows the gate to swing open away from the wall which prevents dogs and people from being pinned along the wall while entering and exiting.
- Kiddie pools in place of bowls and buckets of water (to minimize resource guarding).
- Clips, such as carabineers, attached to the fencing and spaced far apart from one another, to be used to secure dogs in an emergency situation.
- Weather resistant containers to store communication tools (these should be brought inside if temperatures are at or below freezing).
- No toys or treats or any other valued resource since they can become a potential distraction or issue.

A note on yards: Many local businesses are willing to donate labor and/or materials to building play yards. If your shelter does not currently have yards or needs an overhaul, please consider this as a fundraising project that your community will likely rally behind, if you ask them for help!

HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

Each play group should include a team of at least two handlers: a Group Leader and a Runner/Assistant. If you are running multiple play groups simultaneously (in adjoining yards) we suggest at least one Group Leader per yard. If more people are available, then they may participate as an Assistant or Observer. We highly recommend that someone be tasked with taking notes. *See Chapter 7 for more on handler roles.*

Flat collars

Leashes

Baskerville muzzle

Nylon muzzle

Gentle Leaders™

EQUIPMENT AND TOOLS

- Flat collars, fitted properly
- Leashes
- Nylon muzzles in a variety of sizes
- Gentle Leaders™ in a variety of sizes
- Walkie Talkies
- Spray water bottles
- Shake cans
- Spray Shield™
- Pet Corrector™ air blast
- Airhorn

See chapters 8-9 for how to use these tools appropriately.

Spray water bottle

Walkie Talkie

Shake Can
(A basic soda can, with a few coins added to make noise, duct taped closed)

Spray Shield ™

Air horn

Pet Corrector ™

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MEDICAL PROTOCOLS

Consult your medical team prior to implementing play groups. Have your behavioral and medical teams work together to determine medical protocols based on your organization's resources and concerns.

As the sheltering industry progresses to the highest level of life-saving, there will be a more consistent melding of medical and behavioral resources to best serve the "whole" animal.

"We know that behavioral health is just as important to shelter dog adoption as physical health. Dogs Playing for Life™ brings out the best in shelter dogs. The program provides daily enrichment, exercise, and socialization in a way that keeps dogs healthy, happy, and adoptable."

~ Cynda Crawford, DVM, PhD., Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program, University of Florida

"Shelter veterinarians strive to keep animals healthy in their facilities. In situations where the risks of acquiring an infectious agent are high, a shelter veterinarian may find it necessary to impose limitations on play groups. This may be for a brief time period, such as during an outbreak, or for a particular population, such as puppies under 5 months of age who are in a facility that is limited in its ability to control for exposure between naive and ill populations. It is crucial for all to understand that mental health and physical health are inextricably intertwined and that programs such as Dogs Playing for Life™ greatly serve to benefit the overall well being of shelter animals."

~Jyothi V. Roberston, DVM, JVR Shelter Strategies

START UP GROUPS

Getting play groups started with a new population of dogs has a different feel from running groups with dogs who have had prior play group experience. Getting to know new dogs and their skills takes more time and observation than supervising dogs with prior experience. For this reason, if your organization has hosted a DPFL seminar where the entire population of shelter dogs was rotated and assessed, we strongly advise proceeding with daily play groups to maintain the momentum already gained.

Whether or not your organization has hosted a DPFL seminar, remember: New dogs will always be entering the play groups since shelter population is continually turning over. However things will get easier and run more smoothly as your handlers gain experience in observing the dogs and running the groups. If you're just getting started, don't get discouraged. Keep trying. Play groups are a work in progress, which gets easier with practice!

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"Play groups allow observers to gather relevant, helpful information about the dogs. In particular, it helps staff, volunteers, and rescue partners learn more about the social skills of each dog, which in turn, helps them speak more confidently and accurately about the dogs."

~ Animal Fram Foundation

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5

Identifying Participants for Play Groups

Identifying Participants for Play Groups

In our experience, the majority of dogs can participate in play groups.

Play groups can be beneficial for dogs of all ages, sizes, breeds, and temperaments. Inclusion in play groups will depend on the individual dog – they should not be excluded due to blanket restrictions, such as breed. Dogs that display on-leash reactivity or barrier reactivity can still be candidates for play groups. Those behaviors are not accurate predictors of aggression or social ability in an off leash scenario such as play groups.

Additionally, a dog's reproductive status should not disqualify them from play group participation. Being intact is not an accurate predictor or cause of aggression. Many high-volume, open-admission shelters do not neuter dogs until they are adopted. In working with populations such as these, we've had tremendous success running play groups that are almost entirely made up of intact dogs.

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Q: What's the #1 factor in determining the candidates for play groups?
A: The HUMAN.

More so than any other factor, the comfort level of the handler will determine which dogs participate in play groups. Individuals will have varying comfort levels handling varying play styles. Each individual handler will bring their own skills, experiences, ability to interpret canine body language, and comfort levels for group play. People and animals are allowed to display their own style in play groups. The goal is for animals and people to experience happy and healthy social interactions that create an enhanced shelter experience for all.

It may be that the best play group handler at your organization is a dog trainer or behavior specialist. However, this isn't always the case. We often find that staff and volunteers with no formal training do an excellent job running play groups. This may be due to past experience with play groups in doggie daycares or an innate ability to work with dogs in groups.

The best handlers are comfortable working with dogs in groups, can tolerate a variety of play styles while staying calm, and enjoy this work. Beyond any other consideration, the handler's comfort level is the most important aspect to take into account when choosing dogs for playgroups.

Finally, there are very few dogs that can't participate in play groups on some level. However, if a dog displays offensive aggression that you cannot interrupt, they are not candidates for play groups. *See Chapters 8-10 for more.*

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PUPPIES

It is behaviorally beneficial to include puppies in play groups. Please note that the goal of DPFL program is to create and support healthy behaviors, especially in developing puppies. In order to do that safely and effectively, the following guidelines must be in place:

- Pair puppies with appropriate adult dogs. Socially appropriate adult dogs are ideal for teaching puppies bite inhibition and responsive play behavior. They are far better teachers than humans in this regard!

- Puppies must be socialized with playful and/or tolerant dogs only. Puppies should never socialize with un-socialized, fearful, defensive, or offensive adults.

- Puppies can socialize with other puppies, but must be monitored to avoid developing bad habits.

- Always collaborate with your medical staff first since each shelter and geographical region has different health and disease considerations.

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6

Leadership Roles and Handling Techniques

Leadership Roles and Handling Techniques

Dogs communicate well with one another and are often capable of teaching each other what is appropriate behavior during play sessions. The handler's role in the play group is to be a calm, neutral presence that monitors the group, just in case they may need you. Remember: socially healthy dogs are more likely to be better teachers of appropriate canine communication than humans!

The handler's comfort level and ability to stay calm around the dogs is critical in determining the success of the play group.

Whenever possible, at least two people should be present during play groups. We recommend that one person is designated Group Leader during each play group session. The Group Leader can change from day to day, but during any single play session, only one person should be in charge. This reduces conflicts and/or doubt and leads to a calmer environment for the dogs.

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THE GROUP LEADER

- Makes the decisions about which dogs enter and exit the play yards.
- Decides when to interrupt or redirect the dogs.
- Determines how to handle the dogs in general.

In addition to the Group Leader, a Runner will bring dogs from the kennels to the yards. An Assistant may also be present as a second set of hands. Whenever more than one person is present, they must take direction from the Group Leader. Only one person is in charge and making decisions at any time.

We also recommend that one person be assigned to observe and take notes during the play sessions. By recording what occurs – noting each dog's name and their likes, dislikes, and play style – you can set dogs up for success in future play groups. Don't rely on memory. Take notes!

This is especially important if you have different people running the play groups from day to day. Communicate with one another via a log book or record system (either hard copy or electronic) where you can share notes about the play styles and social skills of each dog, as well as which dogs might benefit from playing together or being kept apart, in future groups.

HANDLING TECHNIQUES

How humans interact with the dogs and each other will influence the dogs and their behavior during play sessions. For that reason, it's important that anyone working with the dogs during play groups understands basic handling techniques.

To begin with, think of yourself as a neutral hall monitor. Try not to micromanage the dogs or you run the risk of creating unnecessary tension and/or making yourself and your attention a coveted "resource" among the dogs. Always stay neutral. Here are some things to be aware of, if you will be present during play groups:

YOUR VOICE

- Refrain from unnecessary talking.
- Keep your voice gentle and calm, but confident. For example: A low, steady tone exudes confidence and control.
- Avoid sounding panicked, reactive, or excited.
- Limit talking to the dogs. Remember: play groups are designed for dog-dog interactions. The dogs can play with you one-on-one during a walk or training or enrichment session.

USING NEGATIVE VERBAL MARKERS

Choose and use a consistent negative marker such as "eh-eh" or "enough" in order to clearly communicate with the dogs when they are behaving inappropriately or disproportionally to the feedback they are receiving from the other dogs.

Teach them that this verbal marker will precede an interruption or correction so that they learn to settle down with just a verbal marker. Used correctly, this will make your voice a highly effective communication tool. *See Chapter 8 for more.*

YOUR BODY

- Keep hands away from the dogs. Limit interactions, such as petting, so that the dogs can remain focused on their time with one another.
- Be aware that you might become a highly valued resource to the dogs by giving attention or affection.

USING BODY BLOCKS

Use your body to block the dogs when necessary. Teach them to yield to your legs by using your lower body, rather than your hands, to calmly communicate with the dogs. This is a way to take space, particularly at the entrance gate. You can also use your body to calmly step in between dogs to reduce tension, if necessary.

Dependency upon manual control will limit your ability to control and manage multiple dogs at one time. Using your entire body to communicate your messages with dogs will be more easily received by them and more natural for them to understand.

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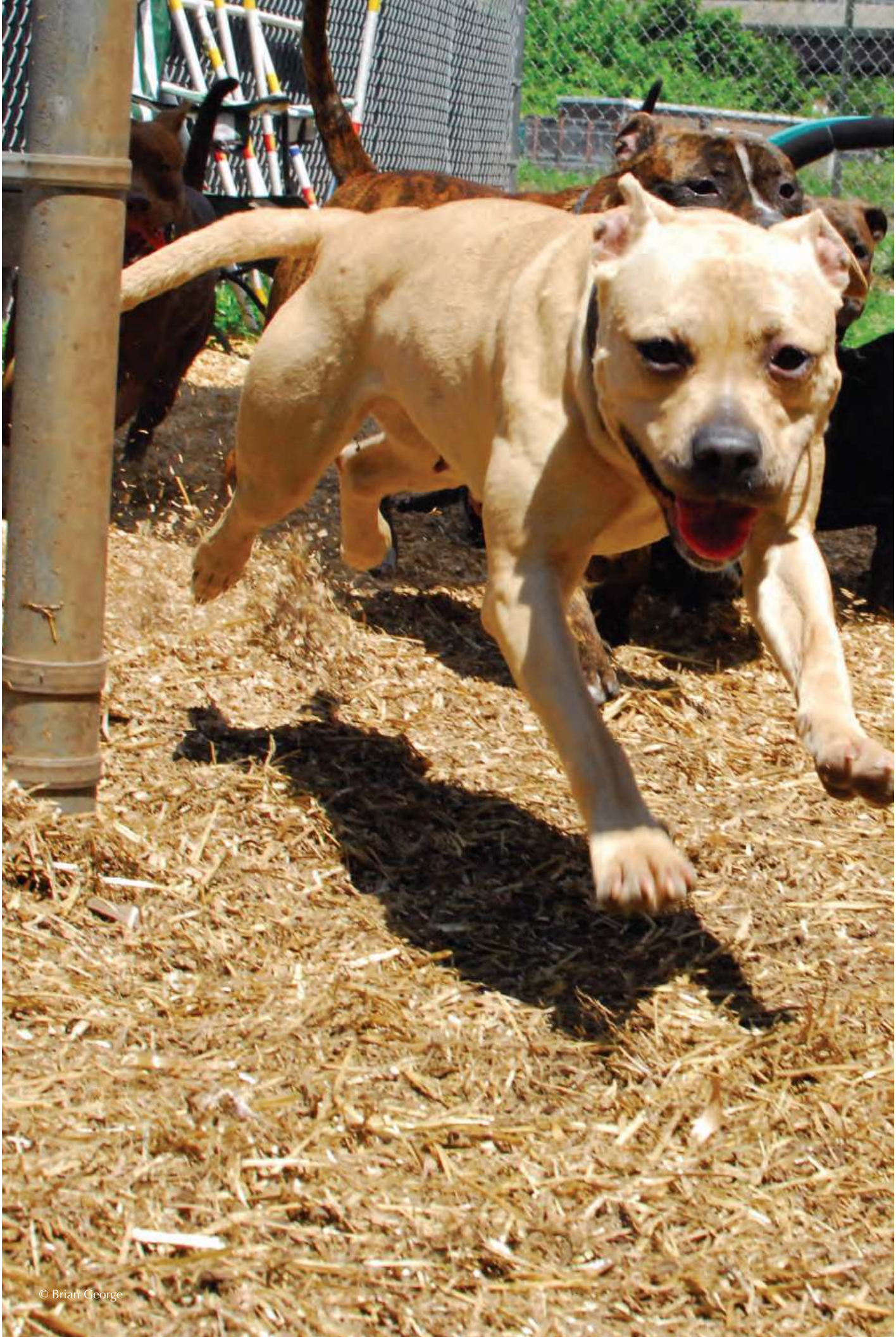
MOVING THE DOGS

When handling the dogs in the play yards by their collars or on leash always guide the dogs smoothly - don't drag them. Use calm, consistent movements and a soft, loose leash or guiding hand. Refrain from using pressure on their collar, as long as they are following you. Don't put the dogs in a defensive state by pulling and dragging them. Create a calm interaction between yourself and the dog that you need to move. Remember: soft and gentle guidance communicates to the dogs that they are correct, while a tight leash or firm grip conveys that they are in trouble. If you need to move a group of dogs away from the gate, use your voice or body to calmly draw their attention away from the entrance point.

WORKING THE GATE

Runners should bring dogs to the entrance gate with a loose leash to convey to them that approaching the play yard is a positive experience. Runners help the Group Leader by allowing the dogs to enter only when they are calm. Group Leaders will want to watch the other dogs when a new dog approaches the gate. Are they interested in meeting the new dog or is the new dog causing them to react negatively? Be careful not to allow frustration to build at the gate as you observe. This is a balancing act!

Use your legs to take the space when opening the gate. You can show the dogs that are entering where an opening is and where to go, while blocking the dogs already in the yard from seeing an opening to get out. This helps the dogs enter the yard with calmer energy. If necessary, use interrupters at the gate to help dogs respect the space that you are occupying and to enter more calmly. *See Chapter 8 for more.*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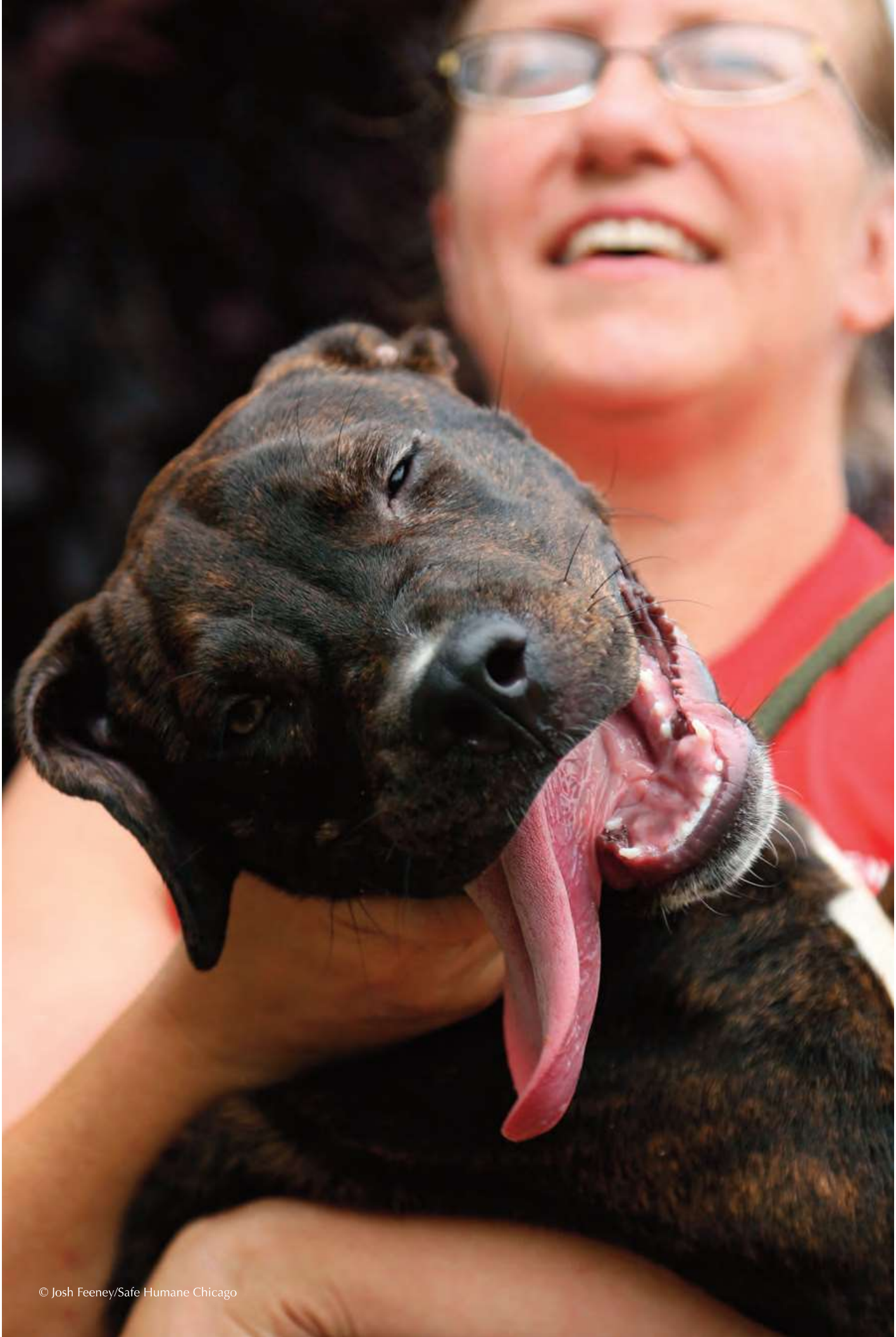

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7

Understanding Play Styles

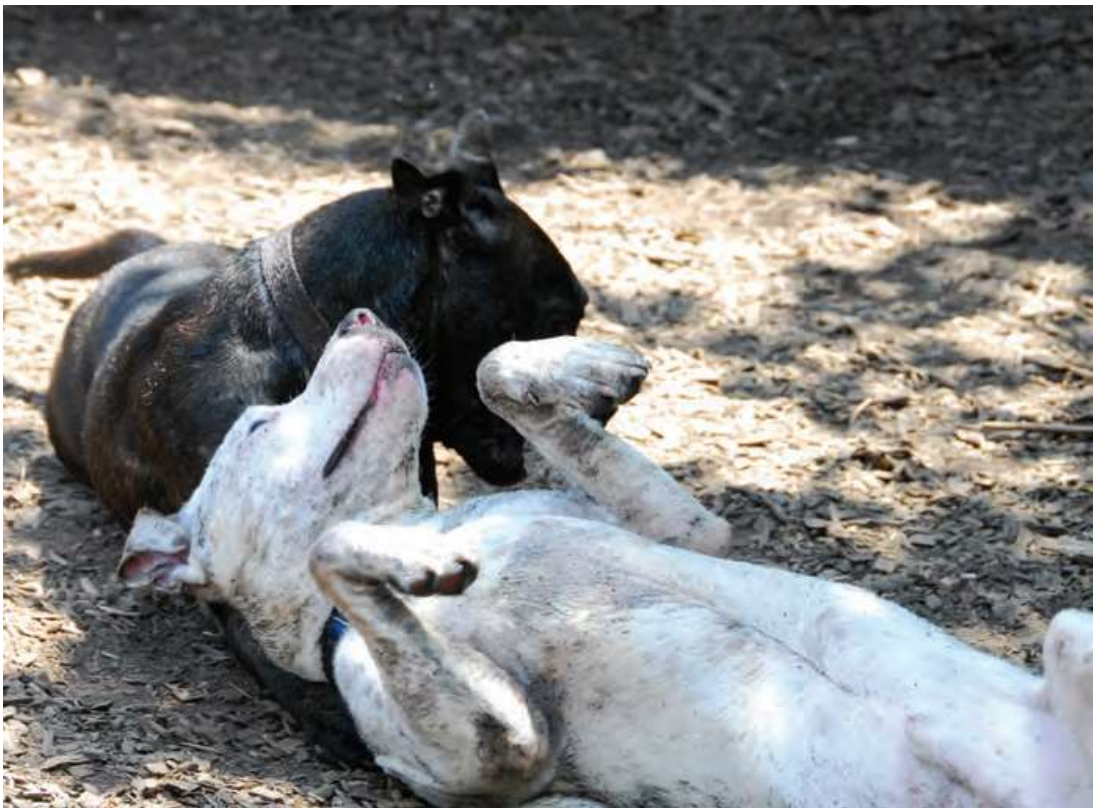
Understanding Play Styles

Since the majority of dogs are able to participate in play groups, there will be a variety of play styles occurring under your supervision. Understanding play styles can help staff and volunteers choose better play mates for the dogs and support healthy social behaviors. However, you can't determine play styles until you see them play!

Whether your organization is just beginning to run play groups or you've recently had a large turnover in your shelter population, there will come a time when you'll need to assess a large number of dogs at once to get to know their individual play styles and skills. Once you have more information (recorded by the Observer) about them as individuals, you can go about creating future play groups that are more tailored to different play styles and social skills.

There are four common play styles you may observe during play groups.

Note: You cannot accurately predict play style based on breed, physical appearance, on leash-behavior, or kenneled behavior.



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1. GENTLE + DAINTY DOGS

- Very mutual play
- Relatively quiet
- Frequently starts and stops play
- Easily becomes nervous

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2. ROUGH + ROWDY DOGS

- Mostly mutual play
- Typically very noisy and vocal
- Very physical, wrestling play style
- Grabbing and holding other dogs
- Chasing and tumbling with other dogs
- Can ramp up and escalate in play (if socially appropriate, will also calm down and deescalate play to avoid conflict)
- This style of play can trigger conflict with other dogs or "tip over" from play to arguments and/or conflicts

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3. PUSH + PULL DOGS

- Less mutual play
- Chasing, driving, and nipping the other dogs
- Not interested in directly engaging, prefers to move other dogs around
- Can get noisy, may use demand barking during play
- Can escalate - often ends in conflict because it can be annoying or antagonistic to other dogs
- May need handler to intervene in order to keep things polite

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4. SEEK + DESTROY DOGS

- Usually not mutual play — always monitor the other dogs to determine if they are mutually re-engaging in play
- Rooted in prey drive, but it is still play
- Often noisy - growling and squealing
- Can escalate into potentially unsafe interactions
- Tends to need handler intervention more than other styles of play
- Provocative to the other dogs in the yard and may influence them to behave aggressively towards the more vulnerable dog

COMPATIBLE AND INCOMPATIBLE PLAY STYLES

- The same play styles generally do well together.

- Push + Pull dogs and Seek + Destroy dogs tend to do well together, because they speak a similar language.

- Rough + Rowdy dogs love to play together. However, not all handlers will be comfortable monitoring this style of rambunctious play.

- Rough + Rowdy dogs and Push + Pull dogs can be combustible when paired together.

- Gentle + Dainty dogs prefer not to play with dogs of differing play styles. Keep them with other Gentle + Dainty dogs.

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Once you've determined the dogs' individual play styles, you can aim to set them up with dogs who they will enjoy interacting with and/or will help them learn new social skills. Ideally, if you have multiple yards that are attached, you can divide the dogs into simultaneous play groups based on their play styles.

When choosing candidates for play groups it is important that dogs are rotated to allow them to meet and play with different dogs. Do not create mini-packs of three or four dogs who play together every day. Change up playmates regularly to avoid creating packs within the common and potentially competitive territory of the yards and kennels.

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8

When and How to Use Interruptions and Corrections

When and How to Use Interruptions and Corrections

By and large, the dogs will move through their communications and work out their own issues without your assistance. Whenever possible, allow them to teach each other these skills, rather than becoming dependent on you, the human, to tell them how to interact in a healthy way as a dog.

However, there are times when the dogs need you to intervene to keep things running smoothly and safely:

- When their play is not mutual.
- When one dog is having fun at the expense of the other.
- When the response is disproportionate to the feedback from the other dog.
- When they are struggling to complete the greeting ritual due to arousal, immaturity, fear, etc.
- When an actual fight breaks out.

A note on fights: Intervene when a fight begins, not before a fight starts. It's acceptable to correct dangerous behavior such as fighting, but it is risky to correct a dog for what you think they may be thinking, as you will often be wrong! Wait until it is an actual behavior that needs correcting and avoid "punishing the thought."

The Group Leader will make the call when and how to intervene, via interruptions or correction tools.

INTERRUPTIONS

- The purpose of an interruption is to momentarily influence the interactions of the dogs with a distraction. It is not a punishment or intended to
  communicate to the dogs that they are in trouble.
- Choose an interruption when the behavior is inappropriate, rather than concerning.
- An interruption is helpful for dogs that need to develop different, more appropriate play habits.
- A typical interruption may be: negative verbal maker, with or without a shake can or a spray bottle.
- An interruption is only necessary if dogs are not responding to one another. The goal is for the dogs to learn how to communicate with each other first.
- Interruptions are often used at the gate, in order to help excited dogs enter the play yard more appropriately.

CORRECTIONS

- The goal of a correction is to extinguish behavior.
- Choose a correction when the behavior is concerning and must not escalate for safety reasons.
- A correction is helpful for dogs that need to show increased responsiveness to the handler (or the other dogs), while decreasing drive in play.
- A typical correction may be: negative verbal marker with a shake can, spray bottle, an air horn, or a spray deterrent.
- Rather than distracting the dog away from the issue, use a correction to teach the dog to make a different choice next time.
- Corrections are intended to quickly, clearly, and calmly provide valuable information that will teach dogs to behave more appropriately so they can remain in play groups.

Always precede the interruptions and corrections with your negative verbal marker. This will teach the dogs to listen for your verbal cue next time, so that no further interruptions or corrections are needed and you can potentially praise them for responding instead.

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REWARDS AND CORRECTIONS

In the shelter environment, it's common for some dogs to be too stimulated or shut down to respond to positive reinforcement alone. Typical rewards, such as petting or food, may be considered an aversive to some dogs while in this environment. Often times the most stressed shelter dogs demonstrate that play groups are the most positive experience of their day by playing happily and communicating with the other dogs in a healthy way. As a result of their positive experience, their overall demeanor and behavior can begin to smooth out quickly.

What is most important to consider and understand is that it is the dog's response to an interruption or correction that matters; not the preconceived notion or opinion of the handler. In order to communicate clearly and effectively with the dogs, Group Leaders must observe the dogs to identify what communication works best for each of dog. For example: one dog might respond well to a squirt bottle as an interruption, while another dog might ignore it, but immediately respond to a rattle from a shake can.

Either way, the handler can look for signs that the dog has heard and deferred to the request to slow down. For example: the dogs ears go back, soft eye contact is offered, etc. As a result, the Group Leader has provided clear communication allowing them to grasp valuable information about appropriate behavior, so that they may continue to interact with the other dogs.

Allowing them to stay in the group using quick, clear interruptions and corrections when needed, can help shelter dogs reap the benefits of play and helps them to thrive in and survive the less than ideal kennel conditions.

Note: It helps if you can determine whether or not a dog finds playing with other dogs to be of value. Is play time a reward? Not all dogs will value playing with other dogs. However, as long as they are appropriate around other dogs, it can be beneficial to have them join play groups, so that they are not isolated in the kennels and to maintain their social skills.

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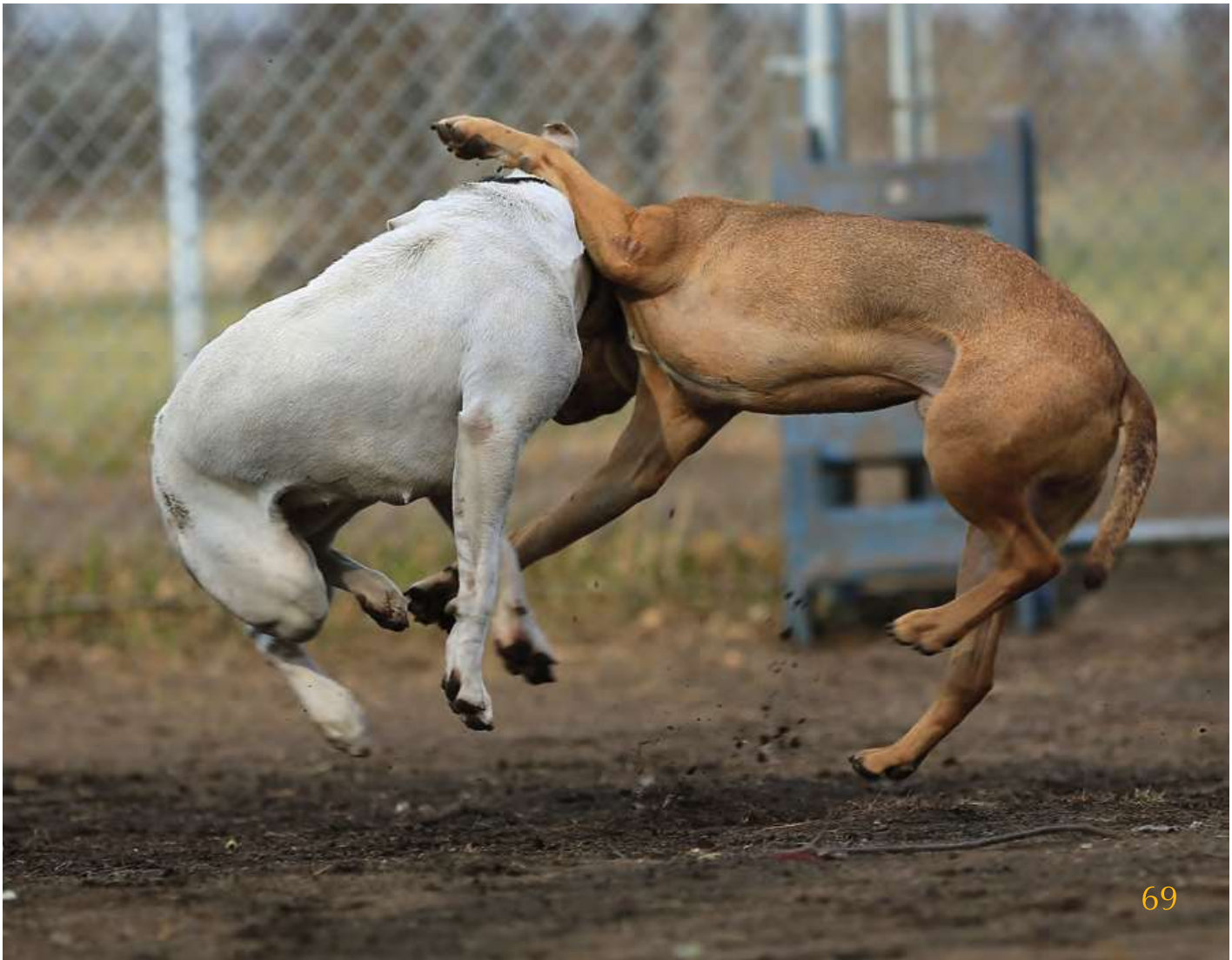

USING COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Spray Bottle: water only

Uses and benefits:

- An interruption or correction used for a single dog.
- Particularly helpful at the gate in order to help dogs enter the yard more calmly and to enforce respectful space from the dogs already in the yard.

Possible disadvantages:

- Dogs may become fearful of handler.
- Some dogs may not consider this an aversive (some dogs may even consider it a reward!) and will not respond to water as intended.

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Shake Can: 4-5 pennies in a small can or tin wrapped in duct tape

Uses and benefits:

- An audible and/or physical interruption or correction used for multiple dogs.
- Shake cans can be rattled lightly or firmly, at or near the "offending" dog or tossed towards the offending dog as a startling tool.

Possible disadvantages:

- Many dogs will hear it simultaneously. Potentially, the "non-offending" dog(s) will be affected in addition to "offending" dog.
- Dogs may become fearful of handler.

Spray Shield™ or Pet Corrector™

Uses and benefits:

- An interruption or correction used for multiple dogs.
- Spray Shield can be sprayed at or near dog's face.
- For some dogs, the sound of the spray is enough of a correction; therefore you do not need to make contact with the spray or air. For other dogs, the pairing of sound and touch is more effective in settling them down.

Possible disadvantages:

- The "non-offending dog" will be affected in addition to the "offending" dog.
- Possible physical reaction to citronella.
- Dogs may become fearful of or reactive to the handler.

Air Horn

Uses and benefits:

- An interruption or correction used for multiple dogs.
- Can be helpful in startling dogs apart that are engaged in a fight.

Possible disadvantages:

- Air horns can be intense and scary to many dogs.
- This correction typically affects all dogs in the yard.
- Possible physical reaction to extreme volume too close to ears.
- Dogs may develop a generalized fear of handler and/or play yard.

© Liz Kowaluk/The Play Yard at Rochester Animal Services

"Dogs Playing for Life!™ has delivered on everything that it promised and so much more. We now have happier, less stressed dogs who present better in their kennels. This is a direct result of their positive experiences in play group and having their emotional and physical needs met. Our dogs are more amenable and receptive to training and behavior work which directly correlates to increased adoptions and better adoption placement matches. We now know more about each individual dog after observing them in play group, which provides us with valuable information that allows us to best support their individual needs."

~ The Play Yard at Rochester Animal Services

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9

Safety Equipment

Safety Equipment

When running play groups with dogs that you are not familiar with and/or when introducing a more challenging dog to an established group of socially healthy dogs, it can be helpful to provide some dogs with varying equipment to ensure safety and peace of mind.

To begin with, all dogs should be wearing flat collars or martingale collars that are properly fitted. Collars that are too loose can be dangerous – paws or mouths can fit into the space that a loose collar provide and present a choking or injury hazard.

LEASHES

Allowing dogs to enter the yards with a leash attached to their flat collars, so that it drags behind them, is helpful in many ways. If you anticipate that the dogs aren't well socialized, are fearful, may overreact to the other dogs, or you are still getting to know the dogs and their skill levels, you can allow the dogs to drag their leashes. Having a leash to grab, in case you need to remove dogs from each other or the yard, helps keep everyone safe. However, dragging leashes can also cause problems if they get tangled during exuberant play. As soon as the Group Leader feels comfortable with the dogs' play, the goal is to remove the dragging leashes.

THE GENTLE LEADER®

Head halters can be helpful for two reasons: they can potentially be a useful distraction or serve as a level of suppression for an exuberant dog that comes on too strongly at first. We only use the Gentle Leader® brand head harness because of the way it fits on a dog's head, which is safe for group play. We fit them normally around the nose and head – not too tightly – so that the dogs are aware of the halter, but still able to drink and pant normally. These can be an excellent tool for unsocialized dogs and may help tone down obnoxious or antagonistic behavior. If the dog will be dragging a leash it is best to attach it to their collar rather than the Gentle Leader®. This is not a tool for an aggressive dog and will not prevent a dog from biting. If you are in doubt, use a muzzle.

MUZZLES

Muzzles are excellent safety tools for any dog that is displaying behaviors that may be considered aggressive or for those with a history of inappropriate behavior with other dogs. If you are not sure about a dog, are unfamiliar with the shelter's population of dogs, or are just beginning play groups, it's ok to muzzle dogs. In fact, it's better to use a muzzle whenever you're in doubt. You can always take it off!

We prefer to use nylon muzzles, sized up, so that it fits loosely. This allows the dogs to drink and breathe easily. Rubber basket muzzles can also be used. Be aware that dogs can be at risk wearing any muzzle in hot weather, so be sure to monitor for signs of over-heating.

Muzzles should be removed once the dog is demonstrating a lack of aggression around the other dogs and/or if you observe that your socially appropriate (or your "helper dogs") are comfortable and showing signs of wanting to play with the muzzled dog. Generally speaking, we consider known and skilled play group dogs to be better judges of a new dog's behavior than the handlers! You can leave a leash dragging or switch to a Gentle Leader® if the dog still needs support in behaving appropriately. *See Chapter 10 for more.*

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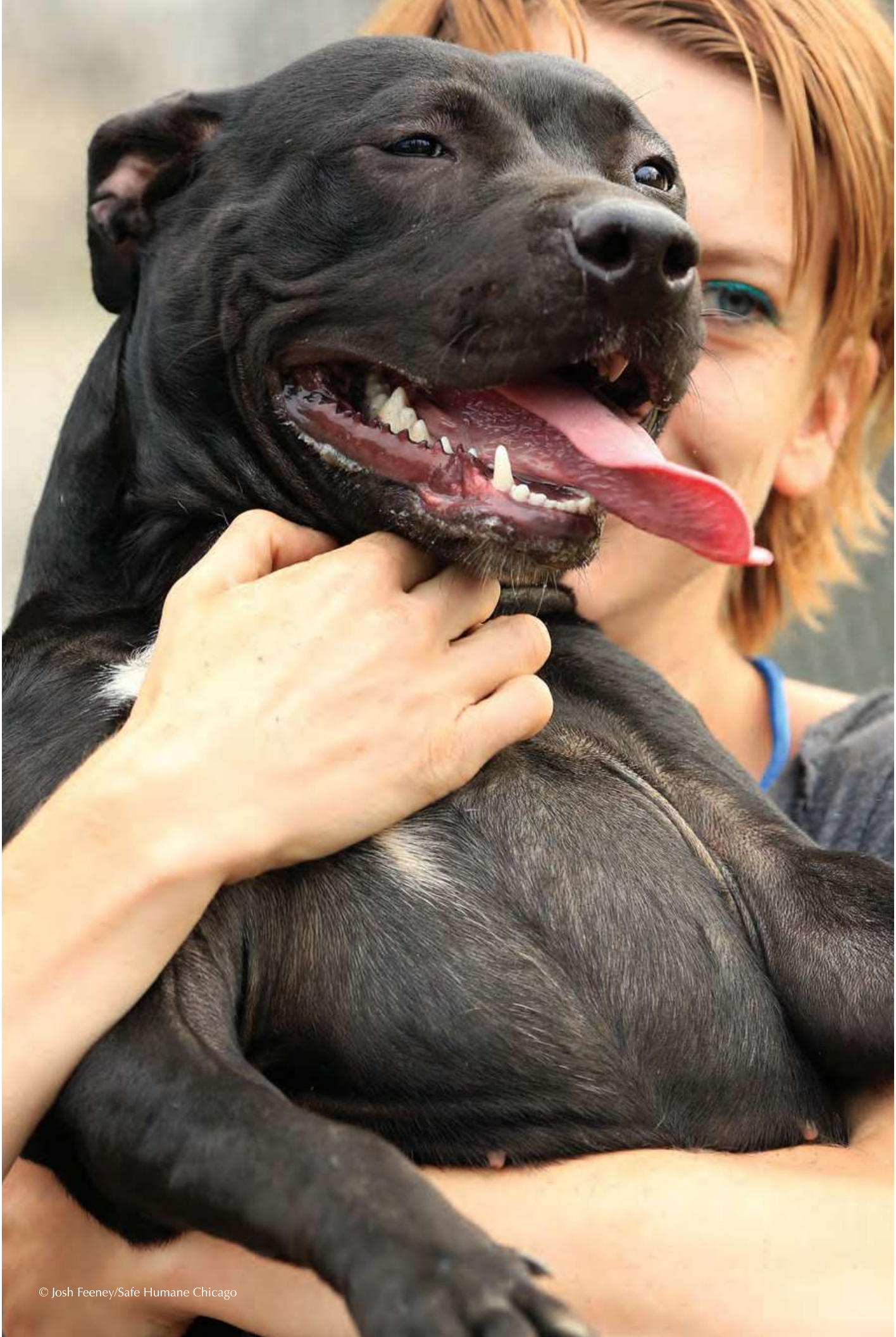

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10

Social Status, Tolerance, and Aggression

Social Status, Tolerance, and Aggression

The term aggression gets thrown around a lot when we talk about dogs. But what does it mean exactly, particularly in relation to play groups?

Aggression is a behavior, not a trait. A dog acts aggressively because of something specific: it may be that they are fearful and therefore defensive. Aggression can be legitimate communication and considered an appropriate response. Or it can be a disproportionate response to a situation. When aggression is disproportionate or unprovoked, the aggression can be considered aberrant behavior. It is up to us to determine when a seemingly "aggressive" response is out of proportion and doesn't make sense or if it is appropriate during a play group situation.

TWO TYPES OF AGGRESSION

1. Defensive: defined as defending or guarding. This type of aggressive behavior is typically rooted in fear and/or anxiety and lack of social skills. Dogs displaying defensive aggression can typically interact with other dogs safely, but may need some support from humans if they misinterpret another dog and overreact. Typically, defensively aggressive animals will choose flight instead of fight when they perceive that they can do so.

2. Offensive: defined as offending; a fault or crime. This type of aggressive behavior is not as common as you may think. Dogs displaying offensive aggression are dog-dog aggressive and are not typically appropriate for play groups. They tend to ignore the cues of other dogs and will pursue a dog that is trying to get away. Offensively aggressive animals will chose to aggress even when they have an opportunity to flee or avoid the conflict.

If a dog has already proven to be offensively aggressive to dogs in the past, they should be eliminated as a play group candidate.

Offensive and defensive behavior may look the same, but it is motivated differently. Therefore, it should be handled differently! All incidences of aggression should be analyzed to determine if the incident was defensive or offensive in nature. Level of damage (if any) should be taken into consideration, in conjunction with the circumstances of the incident, to determine if the dog can remain in play groups and benefit from more social interactions (but not at the expense of the other dogs).

WARNINGS AND THREATS

Warnings and threats are ways for dogs to communicate via their body language and vocalizations. We can learn to read these signals as a way to determine if dogs need us to intervene or not.

Warning: defined as admonition, advice, recommendation. This type of communication tells the other dogs to stop doing what they're doing or there will be consequences. Warnings are an appropriate way for dogs to say, "*Please stop*." Warnings are common when a dog is behaving more defensively.

Threat: defined as a declaration of an intention to inflict injury or pain. When a dog is threatening another dog, we need to be prepared to intervene if it escalates to aggression. Threats are common when a dog is behaving more offensively.

Both warnings and threats are a dog's way of saying "*I don't want to have to be aggressive, so you better stop what you're doing now*." A threat implies the clock is running out and we need to act in order to prevent a follow through.

DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL STATUS

To further understand the dogs and their needs, we can be more specific about the social status of each dog. We will only be able to determine this by watching them play.

Keep in mind that multiple definitions can apply to the same dog and that many dogs will acquire more appropriate social skills with the help of the play groups.

Playful, Dog Social:
Offer consistent gestures to initiate play. They are quick to avoid and/or will diffuse aggression.

Un-socialized:
Overly aroused and/or reactive, despite appropriate social gestures from other dogs.

Fearful:
Generally overwhelmed by the environment, handlers, and other dogs (with or without defensive behaviors).

Prey-like:
Fearful with immediate flight response, usually accompanied by high pitched vocalization, i.e.: moving fast and squeaking.

Tolerant:
Passively avoids interaction with dogs who offer overtly playful and/or antagonistic gestures.

Dominant:

Confident and calm. Often referred to as "bombproof." They may appropriately correct obnoxious behavior or appropriately submit antagonistic behavior from other dogs. They may effectively diffuse aggression. Most likely, they will ignore indifferent dogs and will play with appropriate dogs of either sex. Dominant dogs are play group rock stars!

Defensive:

Does not initiate aggressive behavior, but will respond with aggression to a challenge or being bullied by another dog.

Offensive:

Seeks out opportunities to aggress and are not able to play with other dogs. If you determine that a dog is offensively aggressive, it is no longer safe or appropriate to rely on other dogs to teach the offender social skills.

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SOCIAL STATUS TABLE:
BEST COMBINATIONS FOR INTRODUCTIONS

SOCIAL STATUS TABLE	OPPOSITE SEX	PLAYFUL	TOLERANT	DOMINANT
UN-SOCIALIZED	✓	✓	✓	✓
FEARFUL		✓	✓	✓
PREY-LIKE		✓	✓	✓
DEFENSIVE	✓	✓	✓	✓

**If a dog behaves like prey (immediate flight response with high-pitched vocalization), they should only be introduced to Gentle + Dainty and/or Tolerant dogs to help them learn to respond more safely and less reactively. These appropriate, gentle dogs will help ease them into the play group process and, in teaching them appropriate behaviors, will help prevent them from being targeted and attacked.*

If you're not sure about a dog's social status, it's a good bet to use a muzzle and pair them with a Dominant or Playful dog – sometimes referred to as a "helper dog" – as a play mate. Helper dogs are the social and appropriate dogs that are chosen by the handler to identify and work with dogs the handler anticipates will have some social challenges. They are reliably playful dogs that are typically emotionally and physically stout enough to withstand rude or inappropriate behavior from another dog. The handler counts on these dogs to warn or correct obnoxious or aggressive behavior proportionally.

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Be careful not to overwork your socially appropriate dogs by repeatedly pairing them with unsocial dogs. This can take a toll on the playful dogs and have a negative effect on their social skills. Do not allow a challenged dog to get better at the expense of the already social, well-adjusted dog. Pick from a pool of socially healthy dogs that can be helpful for the dogs that are still learning.

TRACK BEHAVIOR

We recommend keeping regular notes in a dog's file about their behavior in play groups. Not only will this help you set them up for future play groups based on their past conduct, but any important observations and changes in a dog's behavior can be noted. This information will help staff and volunteers communicate with one another.

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11

Understanding Dog Fights

Understanding Dog Fights

Q: Are these the precursors to a fight?

- Pinned Ears
- Erect Tail
- Hackles (shoulders or full body)
- Mounting (assertive or sexual)
- Necking
- Growling
- Showing Teeth

A: No. These are a just communication signals.

Don't focus on the minutia of body language. None of these signals tell you very much on their own. Try to take in the whole picture in order to best read the dogs in front of you. Allow dogs to communicate with one another. What is the other dog doing in response to these communication signals? Do not act right away if you spot signs of tension or stress. Do not "punish the thought", by correcting these communication signals. Always wait until there is an actual behavior that needs correcting.

Remember: the goal of play groups is for dogs to learn how to communicate with one another appropriately, which may sometimes include brief arguments, in order to establish themselves with one another. We do not dictate dogs' relationships with one another (the dogs decide who they like or do not like), but we do monitor their behavior, stepping in only when necessary.

Please reference Chapter 8 for advice on using corrections, interruptions, and when to intervene during play. More often than not, the dogs will have altercations or interactions that they can work out on their own. We encourage you to allow this, as the dogs will learn from each other what is and isn't appropriate.

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If a fight breaks out, keep your cool and focus on safety for the dogs and people involved. The Group Leader will make the decision about how to move forward during a dog fight.

- Always use startling tools first: shake can, spray shield, air horn. If they have startled apart from each other, calmly take them by their attached leash or collar and move them apart.
- If startling fails, be quiet and calm. No yelling. If the air horn didn't work, neither will screaming at them. Yelling may escalate the fight.
- Do not hit the dogs. Causing them pain will not end a fight, but it may cause an escalation in aggression to dogs and/or people.
- Use any object to get between the dogs: trash can, chair, clip board, agility equipment, etc.
- If the dogs are still engaged, grab the dogs by the hind ends or their leashes, before you grab their collars (dogs may redirect onto you if touched while they are in a heightened state of fear or arousal).
- If the dogs are tightly engaged or holding on to each other, **DO NOT PULL DOGS APART.** Pulling can cause far more serious injuries – such as tearing – than the bite itself.
- Immobilize the dog who is holding on and "feed the bite" by controlling the back of their head and pushing into the other dog. Push in, don't pull apart.
- Be mindful of defensive mouths and remove your hands if necessary to avoid handler injury.
- Only pull dogs apart once they have let go of each other.
- Do not let go of the dogs. Remove the offender from the yard.

Whenever possible do Continue Play Recover (behavioral CPR) after the offensive dog has been removed from the yard. Allow the socially appropriate dog that was involved to keep playing, so that they will be able to have another positive experience instead of ending on a bad experience. This will attend to their behavioral and emotional needs right away.

Unless there are serious injuries, allow for 30 minutes recovery time in kennels or yard, prior to invasive, physical examination. This time allows the dogs to safely decompress and decreases potential defensive behaviors. Dogs with punctures or abrasions are typically better off for being given time to CPR. Discuss this approach with your medical team.

Remember, serious fights are not common. The mental and physical benefits of play groups far outweigh the risks!

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12

Information for Adopters

Information for Adopters

By introducing play groups to your shelter, new information will become available that will assist you in your adoptions. For example, after observing the dogs play, it will be easier to match your adopters with dogs who have social skills that match their lifestyles.

Dog Social Categories (adapted from BAD RAP) can help you make better matches with adopters:

Dog Social:

Appropriate and playful with other dogs. Potential* candidates for play in supervised situations such as doggie daycares and small groups in public settings. *Please see pg. 100 "No predictions guaranteed."

Dog Tolerant:

Usually more tolerant than playful or shows no interest in other dogs. May or may not enjoy social settings such as doggie daycares, but will likely act appropriately.

Dog Selective:

Plays well with some dogs, but is intolerant of other dogs or might be targeted by other dogs. Can play very nicely with others when set up correctly by humans; not a good choice for unstructured or public group play settings.

Dog Defensive:

Playful with some dogs, but reactive to dogs that challenge or threaten them. Not a candidate for unstructured or public group play.

Dog Aggressive:

Not able to play with or tolerate other dogs. This behavior is more rare than you think. These dogs need careful, structured management for the safety of all other dogs.

In addition, many shelters require that potential adopter's bring their current dogs to the shelter for a dog-dog introduction. By implementing play groups, you've learned a great deal about your population's social skills. This allows for safer, more appropriate meet and greets with adopter's dogs.

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NO PREDICTIONS GUARANTEED

Share what you've learned so far about the dogs during play groups, but make sure to note to adopters that this information is a snapshot of their behavior at the shelter and that nothing is guaranteed. How a dog behaves in play groups at the shelter isn't a guarantee of how they will interact with other dogs or people once they are in a different environment, such as a dog park or an adopter's home. That's because dog behavior is influenced by many external and internal factors. A new home, new canine housemates, and new owners and relationships will all have an effect on how a dog behaves.

For example: Successful play groups are not a guarantee that a dog will be social with other dogs in their home or in public settings. Dogs are individuals and have personality conflicts, just like us. Play groups do not guarantee that territorial or resource guarding issues will not surface in the home. While play groups do help us get to know the dogs better, once they are adopted their new environments and new relationships will influence their behavior in ways we cannot predict.

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"The percentage of the dogs that we've been pairing up from play groups, their adoption rates skyrocketed. So once we match them up in play groups and we know so much more about them, those dogs find homes so much quicker thanbefore these play yards were ever put here."

~ Tori Fugate, a spokesperson for the shelter, KC Pet Project, Kansas City, MO

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13

A Holistic, Sustainable Program

A Holistic, Sustainable Program

Play groups do more than just enrich the lives of the dogs; they can contribute to the overall health of the entire organization in many ways.

PUBLIC EVENTS

Invite the general public to watch your play groups as an additional way to help them select a dog to adopt. By allowing the public to see the dogs playing off leash, it will help make connections that might have been missed in the kennels. It's a fun and positive experience for the public to see dogs being dogs in the yard!

If this is something your organization would like to do, we recommended picking a designated day and time for public play groups. Some shelters offer them every Sunday, while others offer them on afternoons throughout the week. This is not the time to do difficult introductions or observe new dogs with unknown skills. Leave that to the private play sessions, such as the morning groups held during kennel cleaning hours. For the public play groups, choose dogs that are socially appropriate and ready to go home!

Make this a festive, welcoming event that the public can look forward to attending on a regular basis. You'll draw in adopters, but also potential donors and volunteers as well.

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PROMOTE YOUR SHELTER

Use social media to promote the public play groups and don't forget to take photos of the dogs in action for future promotions. Those action shots are likely to help get the dogs adopted, as well as being excellent marketing and fundraising materials. Use these groups to help promote how joyful life with a shelter dog can be!

NETWORK WITH RESCUES

Many shelters also use play groups as a way to network with local rescues. Cynthia Bathurst, Director of Safe Humane Chicago shares, "During a recent Court Case Dog Program celebration of our rescues, we had a lower turnout of rescues than before, yet we transferred more dogs that day because they were able to see our dogs in play groups – and several rescues commented that seeing the play groups is why they decided so quickly to take the dogs they did. We will continue to invite rescues to observe dogs in play groups as part of our relationship building with the rescue community and to help further identify appropriate matches."

ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS

This is the kind of program where volunteers can have a major impact. In some shelters, such as Rochester Animal Services in New York, the Dogs Playing for Life!™ program is entirely volunteer-run! This type of program is satisfying and enjoyable for many to participate in. Use play groups as a way to recruit and retain new, skilled volunteers to your shelter.

IN CONCLUSION

Save More Lives

Ultimately, play groups can help your organization achieve long term success by increasing the placement rate for your dogs. By observing the dogs in the yards, it's easier to determine better matches for foster homes, adopters, and rescues. The staff will gain valuable dog handling skills and will have a better understanding of the individual dogs in their care. The dogs themselves will gain valuable skills and stay mentally and physically healthier during their time at your shelter. Over time, this will lead to more adoptions and more lives saved.

The 2012 Canine statistics from Southampton Animal Shelter backs this up:

Their overall live release rate for dogs was 97% as an open admission shelter that also accepts transfers.

That's what we mean by Dogs Playing for LIFE!

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14

Resources and Continuing Education

Resources and Continuing Education

This guide to play groups is only the beginning of your play group education!

Think of it like this: How did you learn to drive a car? First you learned passively, by reading or watching videos and by observing others drive, and then you learned actively, by getting behind the wheel. That hands-on experience of driving is a part of the learning process that can't be captured in words. We have to feel it for ourselves, gaining valuable skills through the real-world application of our knowledge.

Play groups are much the same way. This guide provides an excellent foundation, but there's much more to learn. As you implement play groups, it's likely that you will encounter some challenges and have many questions. That's to be expected! If you have questions or concerns, we're here to help. We encourage you to attend our hands-on training and seminars for more in-depth and continued support.

For more Dogs Playing for Life!™ information, resources, tools, and contact information, please visit: http://dogsplayingforlife.com/

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THANK YOU TO OUR PHOTOGRAPHERS

We would like to sincerely thank the amazing photographers who generously donated their work to this project and who continually support the work of Dogs Playing for Life. All of these talented artists are volunteers in shelters across the country, and many of them are involved in running play groups at their respective organizations. Their images are instrumental in putting faces and lives to the idea of dogs playing in shelters, and also often help the public more generally to see shelter dogs in a new light. They give generously of their time and talent, and for that we are eternally grateful.

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Invite this play group enrichment program to your shelter — and save more dogs.

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This program is generously sponsored by Animal Farm Foundation, and is endorsed by the Humane Society of the United States.

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