DOGS LIVE TO PLAY. NOW LET THEM PLAY TO LIVE!
“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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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.
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
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!™
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.
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.
“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
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.”
“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.”
“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.”
“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.”
“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