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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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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 marker, 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.



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.





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“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





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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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.