

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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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 than before these play yards were ever put here."

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



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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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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!TM 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.

www.dogsplayingforlife.org



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

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