

Position Statement: Playgroups for Shelter Dogs

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians supports the use of playgroups for shelter dogs when the benefits can be maximized and the risks adequately addressed. This position is consistent with the ASV's belief that promoting the behavioral welfare of dogs in shelters by providing enrichment, stress reduction, and mental/physical stimulation is critical.

Playing with other dogs in group settings is one form of enrichment that can have significant potential benefits for shelter dogs, including socialization, exercise and opportunities to engage in additional stimulating activities, such as interaction with people, exploration and object play. Playgroups also offer insight into a dog's personality -- including identification of preferences, play styles, and dog-dog interactions -- thereby serving as a component of their overall behavioral portfolio. Time in playgroups reduces stress in house-trained dogs by providing opportunities for elimination outside when outdoor play areas are used, and increases the likelihood this desirable behavior will be maintained. Additional benefits include enhanced public perception of the shelter and the dogs, and better leveraged staff and volunteer time.

To achieve these benefits, playgroup programs at shelters should include:

- Implementation of a written protocol with frequent review and staff/volunteer training to ensure adherence to standard operating principles;
 - Provision of adequate supervision during dog introductions and play time to minimize negative outcomes: injury to dogs, induction or exacerbation of stress or fear in dogs, and injury to staff or volunteers;
 - Careful selection of dogs for playgroups through
 - Recognition that not every dog is appropriate for or wants to be in a playgroup,
 - Matching of dogs with appropriate playmates (e.g. play style, sex, age, size),
 - Removal of dogs from playgroups who demonstrate dangerous, aggressive, or fearful behavior, and
 - Optimizing human and animal safety by limiting the number of dogs in playgroup based on staff/volunteer training, skillset, and shelter resources;
 - Minimizing disease transmission through

- Playgroup protocols designed with input from the shelter's veterinarian,
- Screening for infectious diseases, medical conditions impacting participation, and other risk factors (e.g. age, vaccination status), and
- Implementation of biosecurity practices for dogs, play yards, toys, and equipment;
- Reporting and tracking of negative outcomes (e.g. bites, injuries, undesirable or detrimental behaviors, and disease transmission) in a formal and transparent manner. Additionally, shelters are encouraged to track positive outcomes, including the development of more social behaviors in fearful or shy dogs, decreased stereotypic behavior in kennels, increased adoption rates, decreased length of stay, higher staff morale, and improved public perception; and
- Providing a safe space for normal canine play and activity through thoughtful design, regular inspection and maintenance of play yards.

Shelters are strongly encouraged to employ humane behavioral modification techniques during play group supervision. When aversives are used, they should be the least intrusive, minimally aversive tools and techniques. Except in cases of imminent safety concerns, anything other than mild aversives should not be used as first-line or routine interventions. Regular or routine use of aversives should prompt evaluation of the standard operating protocol, particularly in areas of dog selection, staff training, and supervision.

Shelters should schedule regular re-evaluation of their playgroup protocols and success. Best practices include periodic review of staff/volunteer training and adherence to protocols, tracking disease incidence associated with play groups, as well as keeping abreast of new developments in the shelter animal behavior field.

Resources:

AVSAB Position Statement: "The Use of Punishment for Behavior Modification in Animals."

Center for Shelter Dogs: "Doggie Social Hour: How to Run a Playgroup in Your Shelter."

[Website-CSD_Playgroup_Manual-11.11-1.pdf \(tufts.edu\)](#)