

# DOG PLAY GROUPS HANDLER TRAINING

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information adapted from **SHELTER PLAYGROUP ALLIANCE**



# NEW SCIENCE OF PLAY GROUPS

# Shelter Playgroup Alliance: LIMA-Model

- “Least Intrusive/Minimally Aversive”
- Humane hierarchy for training/behavior change protocols adopted by most major professional organizations.
- *“LIMA-based playgroups control the environment in a way that sets the stage for dogs to be successful, while utilizing tools that increase desired behaviors, rather than those that temporarily suppress unwanted behaviors. While tools that discourage behaviors may be necessary in some situations, LIMA-based playgroups aim to minimize their use rather than rely on them.” – SPA Handbook*

# LIMA Approach

- Focus on smaller groups (usually pairs)
- Maximize opportunities for choice
- Proactive role from handlers
- Positively train recalls out of play
- Minimize use of aversives

# Why This Approach?

- Based more closely on science behind dog behavior and humane model of behavior change.
- Independent third-party study by Monmouth University compared different play group styles
  - ▣ SPA model correlated with reduced stress (lower cortisol levels) and better kennel presentation (more pro-social behaviors and less avoidance behaviors) as compared to other PG models.
- Dogs play more when humans are engaged.



# EQUIPMENT

# Equipment Used

- Harnesses
- Drag lines of various lengths
- Radios
- Treat pouches and treats
- Squeaky toys
- Fight break-up kit:
  - ▣ Board
  - ▣ Water
  - ▣ Noise makers

# Safe Use of Food in Groups

- Used to reinforce desired behaviors such as recalls or taking breaks from play
- Food only to be used by trained handlers
- Not to be used with dogs that have been known to resource guard
- Reward when dog is not in proximity to other dogs



# PROCEDURES

# Before the Play Group



- Behavior Team will compile list of dogs appropriate for play group
  - ▣ Dogs who have been determined dog-social
  - ▣ No current medical restrictions

# Before the Play Group

- Prepare the yard
  - ▣ Gather required equipment
  - ▣ Pick up toys
- Identify compatible pairs
  - ▣ Similar size, age, energy level, play preference = usually most compatible partners
  - ▣ Try to pair opposite sex first, then male/male, then female/female

# Introducing Dogs

- Dogs should ideally be on harnesses for play groups
- Brief initial introductions with protected contact (fence between)
- If barrier frustration is an issue, may try an on-leash parallel walk first with dogs at safe distance.
  - When dogs' arousal has gone down, then attempt intro through barrier

# Introducing Dogs

- If fence intro goes well, move to semi-protected contact
  - ▣ Dogs on leash, each held by a handler, no barrier between
  - ▣ Keep leashes loose, don't get tangled
- If continue to have loose, pro-social body language (see following slides), drop leashes

# Leash Handling

- “Microphone hold” on handle
- Second hand further down leash
- Stay to side of dog you are handling, not directly behind
- Don’t let leashes get tangled, or let other dog get between you and your dog
- If you need to move dogs apart with leash pressure:
  - ▣ Communicate intent to other handler
  - ▣ Say “1-2-3-Let’s go” and both move your dog
  - ▣ Apply pressure down and away, not up and back

# SPA Video: Introducing Dogs

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- <https://youtu.be/xKkAz5G5SZg>

# SPA Video: Consent Tests

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- <https://youtu.be/rUdi3Ptq6ZQ>





# Managing Play

# Green Light – “Good” Play

- ❑ Loose, unbalanced, curved, and bouncy bodies
- ❑ Relaxed mouths, soft faces
- ❑ Relaxed tails and body postures
- ❑ Play bows with bent elbows
- ❑ Inhibited mouthing
- ❑ Frequent breaks in play
- ❑ Role reversal, e.g. taking turns chasing and wrestling
- ❑ After a break, both dogs seek re-engagement
- ❑ Self-handicapping
- ❑ Seeking proximity to players
- ❑ Exaggerated movements
- ❑ Play growls or vocalizations that are not excessive
- ❑ Space between dogs during parallel running

# Yellow Light (Watch/Intervene)

- Lack of role reversals
- Tense body posture
- Lip licks
- Hackles raised
- One dog backed into corner
- Whale eye
- Continued lingering sniffing, especially around muzzle
- Chin overs
- Paw overs
- Mounting
- Single air snap
- Displacement behaviors, e.g. sniffing, scratching, yawning, and lip licking
- Chest butting or vertical play
- Ignoring other dogs' cut-off signals
- Grabbing, holding, and pulling on skin

# Red Light (Intervene/End Play)

- Hiding
- Low tucked tails
- Frequent lip licks
- Whale eye
- Avoiding interactions, including seeking a high surface on which to avoid others
- Tense forward body posture, high alert tail, does not disengage on own
- Forward ears, forward body posture, high tense tail
- Stiff bodies, and full body hackles
- Lunging
- Hard stare
- Growling, snarling, snapping
- Pinning others down, failure to disengage on own
- Escalations in vocalization, changes in tonality, and loudness

# SPA Video: Green, Yellow, Red Behaviors

- <https://youtu.be/nB4JmAskNI4>

# SPA Video: Managing Arousal

- <https://youtu.be/4ifctn4y-qE>

# Training Recalls Out of Play

- Any handler can decide to call dogs out
- Communicate to other handler (“Call Dogs”)
- Each handler calls a dog, or uses squeaky toy
- Use handler movement to draw dogs towards handlers
- Reinforce dogs for going to handler
  - Each handler has one dog they are rewarding – avoid handing treats out when multiple dogs are present
- Condition positive response to squeaky toy (squeak=treat) to use as alternate recall cue

# Using Recalls

- Add pauses to play
- Train good habits for the dog park
- De-escalate situations of increasing arousal
- If dogs have been exhibiting “yellow” or “red” body language signs, end play



# LIMA Methods to Managing Conflict (Least to Most Invasive)

- Recall to food reward (can use squeaky toy)
- Use harness/leash to gently move away
- Block with “pig board,” cardboard, etc. between dogs
- Water first sprayed near head, then spray dogs in conflict if needed
- Loud noise (air horn, banging bowls)
  - These methods affect all dogs in area and can condition fear responses in sound sensitive dogs.

# Questions?

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