SHELTER
PLAYGROUP
ALLIANCE

Empowerment. Education. Enrichment.

Inter-Dog
Playgroup
Guidelines

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Our Guidelines

We have gathered a group of well-educated animal behavior and training professionals with experience in open- and limited-admission shelters to create these guidelines. The result is an approach grounded in behavioral science and the LIMA (Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive) ethical standard. We all agree that there is no "one best way". As such, we have written the guidelines to be flexible to meet the needs of your shelter.

Our Mission

The mission of the Shelter Playgroup Alliance (SPA) is to provide animal welfare organizations with education and tailorable guidelines and support materials that facilitate healthy inter-dog interactions. LIMA-based playgroups are devoted to providing dogs with opportunities to consent, physical and mental safety, and avoid the use of aversives.

Our Vision

All shelter dogs who enjoy inter-dog interactions will experience physically, and behaviorally healthy interactions, regardless of shelter resources. All staff and volunteers will have the education necessary to demonstrate excellent management of inter-dog interactions and provide multi-faceted enrichment to shelter dogs.

Using this guide

Written by and for behavior and training professionals

This guide is written for dog behavior and training professions and uses technical terms employed by individuals in that industry.

If you are not a behavior and training professional, the **Glossary of Terms** will be a helpful tool, along with videos on the Shelter Playgroup Alliance YouTube channel. Look for words in *italics* in this guide, which will be found in the glossary list.

Managing safe and healthy play is an advanced skill, and we recommend that any individual engaging in implementing these guidelines undertake the development of the knowledge and skill required for safety and success. The **References and Further Reading** section of this guide is a great place to start.

Contents

Key Concepts

Key Concepts

Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive

LIMA Ethical Standard

Adherence to the LIMA ethical standard means that positive reinforcement is the first line of any intervention. Positive reinforcement is associated with the lowest incidence of aggression, avoidance, and fear. With the LIMA standard in mind, the use of punishment, e.g. startling noises or water from a squirt bottle as a first line of intervention, is simply not justified. Behavior change can be effected by focusing on the animal's environment, physical well-being, and *operant* and *classical conditioning* interventions (IAABC, 2018).
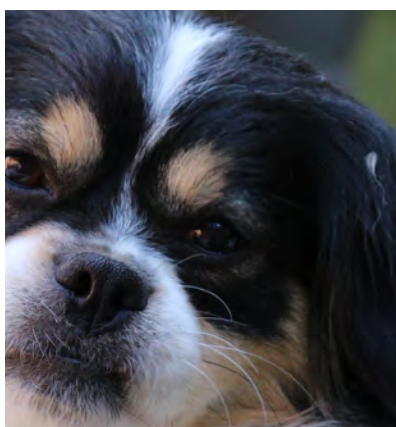
Choice and Empowerment

Developing Confidence

Providing animals choice and respecting their needs is a cornerstone of excellent animal care. Animals who are given the choice to opt-in or opt-out of inter-dog interactions, including play, develop more confidence and are more willing participants in activities. Through paying attention to dogs' responses to *consent tests*, we can facilitate healthy inter-dog play. See the section entitled **Choice, Control, and Empowerment** for more information.
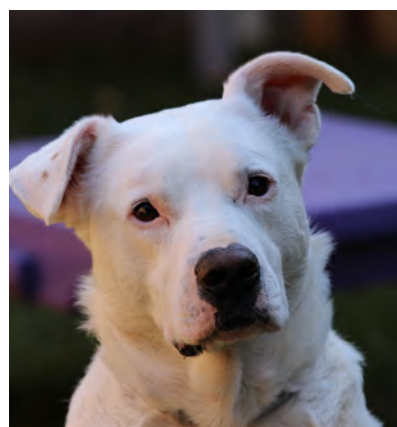
Managing Arousal

Keeping Play Safe

Chronic stress and excessive high arousal can be detrimental to the long-term health of all animals (Bartlett, 2017). We apply the science of arousal to the guidelines and encourage the use of strategies for managing arousal levels for inter-dog play. Maintaining lower levels of positive arousal can also reduce the chances of inter-dog aggression and injuries to dogs and handlers. See the **Arousal** section of this guide for more details.
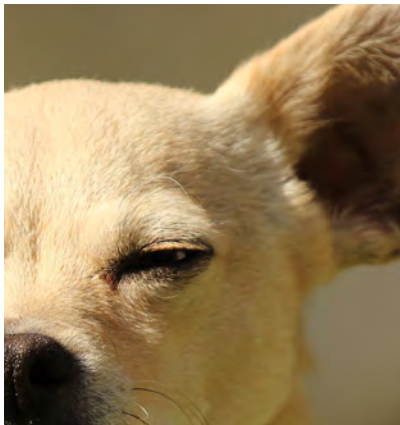
Preparation for Home Life

Skill-building for Success

These guidelines feature strategies for creating and maintaining behaviors that can be desirable for adopters. For example, we advocate that you employ frequent breaks, call the dogs back to the handlers, and reinforce. These practices set the dogs up for success when they visit the dog park or are hiking off-leash, as they facilitate the development of a learning history for good recall. See the **Equipment & Materials**; **Assessing "Good" Play**; and **Dog to Handler Ratios & Managing Arousal** sections for more details.

Minimizing Risk through Management

Low-stress Minimized Risk

Through the use of LIMA-based playgroup management strategies, we can minimize stress levels in the dogs in our care. These guidelines also promote healthy play through limiting the number of dogs in each playgroup and maximizing dog-handler ratios to ensure a safe and fun play environment. These guidelines contraindicate the use of *flooding* and *aversives* so that the animals in our playgroups can develop positive associations with other dogs as well as handlers. See the **Dog to Handler Ratios & Managing Arousal** section for more information.
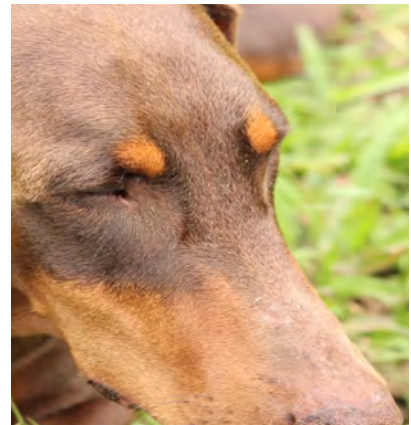
Alternative Enrichment

Playgroups are not Everything

Not all dogs want to play with other dogs. In addition to using inter-dog play as an enrichment strategy for those dogs who enjoy play with their *conspecifics*, we also highlight enrichment alternatives for those dogs who do not enjoy inter-dog play. See the section entitled **Choice, Control, and Empowerment** for more information.

Arousal

VALENCE MATTERS.

Arousal is the amount of energy that is expended in a particular context. Affect, or emotion, is a function of high or low arousal, and valence, either positive or negative. Valence describes the value of the arousal, either positive (good) or negative (bad). When animals are highly aroused, with a positive valence, we could describe that affect as "elated" (see Figure 1) (Posner, Russell & Peterson, 2005). When animal are highly aroused, with a negative valence, we could describe that affect as "angry" or "aggressive" (Barrett, 2017).

Knowing the direction of arousal is more important than arousal itself.

Managing arousal levels in our shelter dogs during play is a key component of allowing dogs to be "happy", and still maintain self-control. This is also important to minimize damage to their immune systems through excessive arousal (Bartlett, 2017).
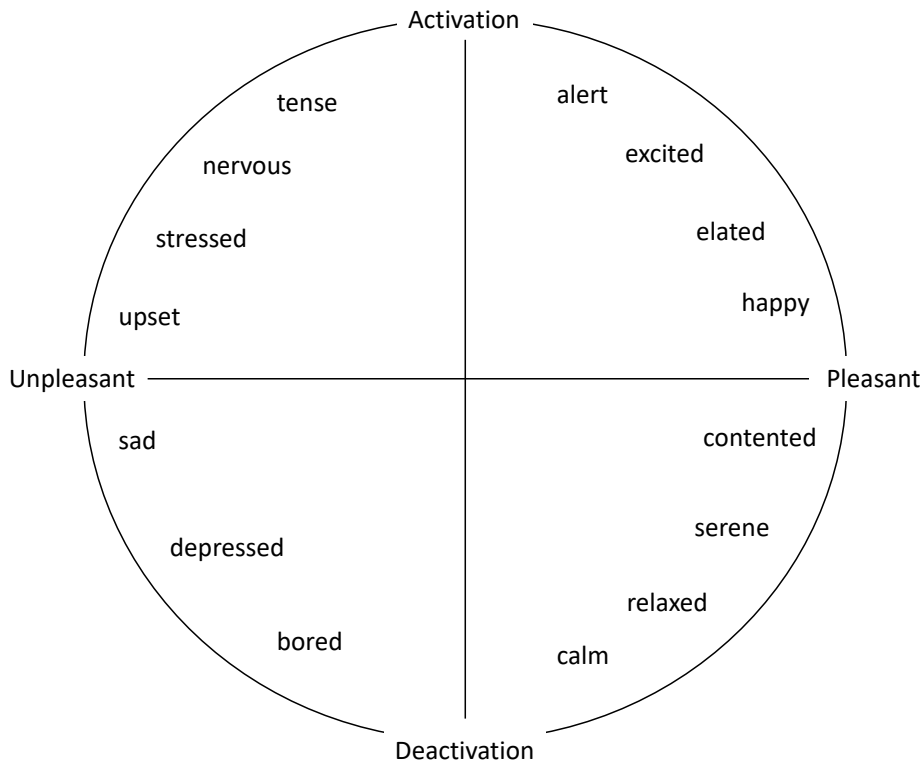
Figure 1. A representation of the circumplex model of affect (Posner, Russell & Peterson, 2005).

Applying the Circumplex Model to Dogs

Application of the arousal literature to canids requires some adaptation as we are not able observe or identify the same full spectrum of emotions in dogs in the same ways we can with humans. The adaptation of the circumplex model (see Figure 2) is designed to support the identification of emotions that can be mapped to observable behaviors, including canine body language. The labels that are often used to describe problem behaviors in the shelter environment can be correlated with negative emotions and high arousal, like anxiety, fear, and frustration.

HIGH

- *Anxiety*
- *Fear*
- *Frustration*

- *Excitement*
- *Anticipation*
- *Fun*

NEGATIVE   NEUTRAL   POSITIVE

- *Boredom*
- *Depression*
- *Exhaustion*

- *Calm*
- *Relaxation*
- *Contentment*

LOW

Figure 2. Adaptation of the circumplex model of affect to dogs

Applying the Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive (LIMA) Standard to Playgroups

ETHICS ARE IMPORTANT.

> **LIMA** describes the **least intrusive, minimally aversive** strategy out of a set of humane and effective tactics likely to succeed in achieving a training or behavior change objective (IAABC, 2018).

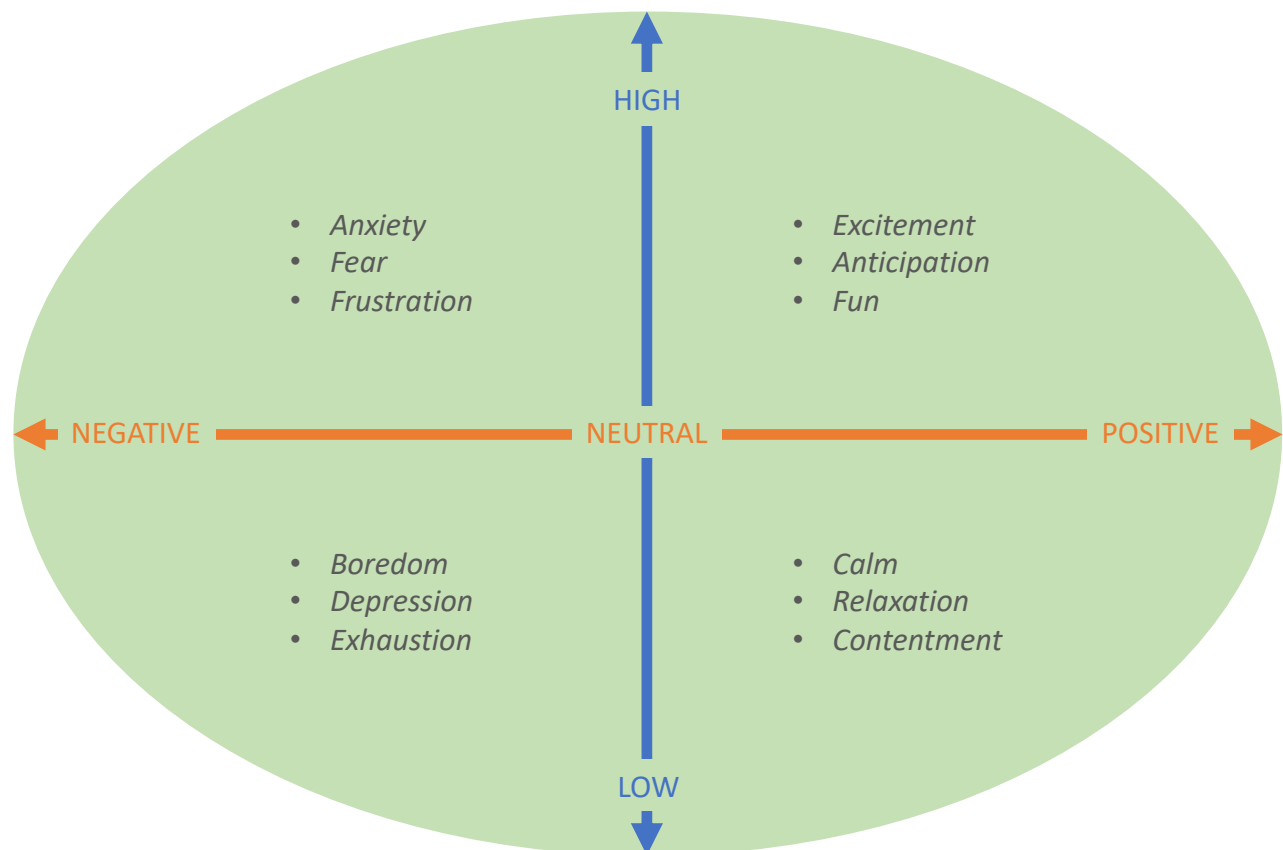The LIMA ethical standard was conceptualized to provide competency-based criteria for animal behavior professionals. Trainers and consultants who follow the LIMA ethical standard often refer to the Humane Hierarchy graphic created by Dr. Susan Friedman (see Figure 1).

In both concepts, ruling out health reasons for a behavior is the first step in the behavior change process. The Humane Hierarchy then focuses on changes to the environment that may be contributing to the behavior, such as covering a dog's kennel with a blanket to prevent reaction to other dogs walking by. From there, the desired behavior or alternative behaviors are reinforced. By following these principles, the need for intrusive or aversive procedures are minimized, if not eliminated.

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. See the **Managing Inter-Dog Conflict** section for additional information, as well as a list of tools presented from least-to-most aversive.

LIMA-based playgroups prioritize dogs who enjoy spending time with other dogs, consider the body language of the dogs throughout the entire interaction to ensure that all dog participants are enjoying inter-dog play, and removes dogs that become fearful, over-aroused, stressed, or indicate a desire to leave.

By incorporating LIMA and the Humane Hierarchy into shelter playgroups, we can maximize the enrichment and stress-reduction benefits.

Playgroups for modifying behavior

Some shelter dogs may have a play skill deficit. This could be due to removal from the litter too soon, a lack of early socialization to other dogs, or traumatic incidents. In some cases, these dogs can benefit from play with social dogs. In addition, playgroups can encourage social learning in fearful dogs who are pro-social with confident and well-adjusted conspecifics, providing positive experiences around new people or in new environments.

Appropriate helper dogs are tolerant of dogs with play skill deficits who may be pushy and overly physical in play and won't overwhelm fearful dogs. They are skilled at diffusing tension and offering appropriate play signals, and adapt to the needs of each playmate. Care should be taken not to overuse helper dogs for behavior modification purposes, as they can develop negative conditioned emotional response (-CER) to other dogs over time.

The use of playgroups for behavior modification requires an advanced knowledge of iner-canine body language, proactive play interruption skills to prevent escalation, and an understanding of behavior modification concepts and techniques to create a safe environment for all dogs involved. See the section on **Shaping Appropriate Play** for guidance on how to shape positive play behaviors.

Figure 1.

Hierarchy of Behavior-Change Procedures
Most Positive, Least Intrusive Effective Intervention

- Positive Punishment
- Extinction, Negative Reinforcement and Negative Punishment
- Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviors
- Positive Reinforcement
- Antecedent Arrangements
- Wellness: Nutritional, Physical
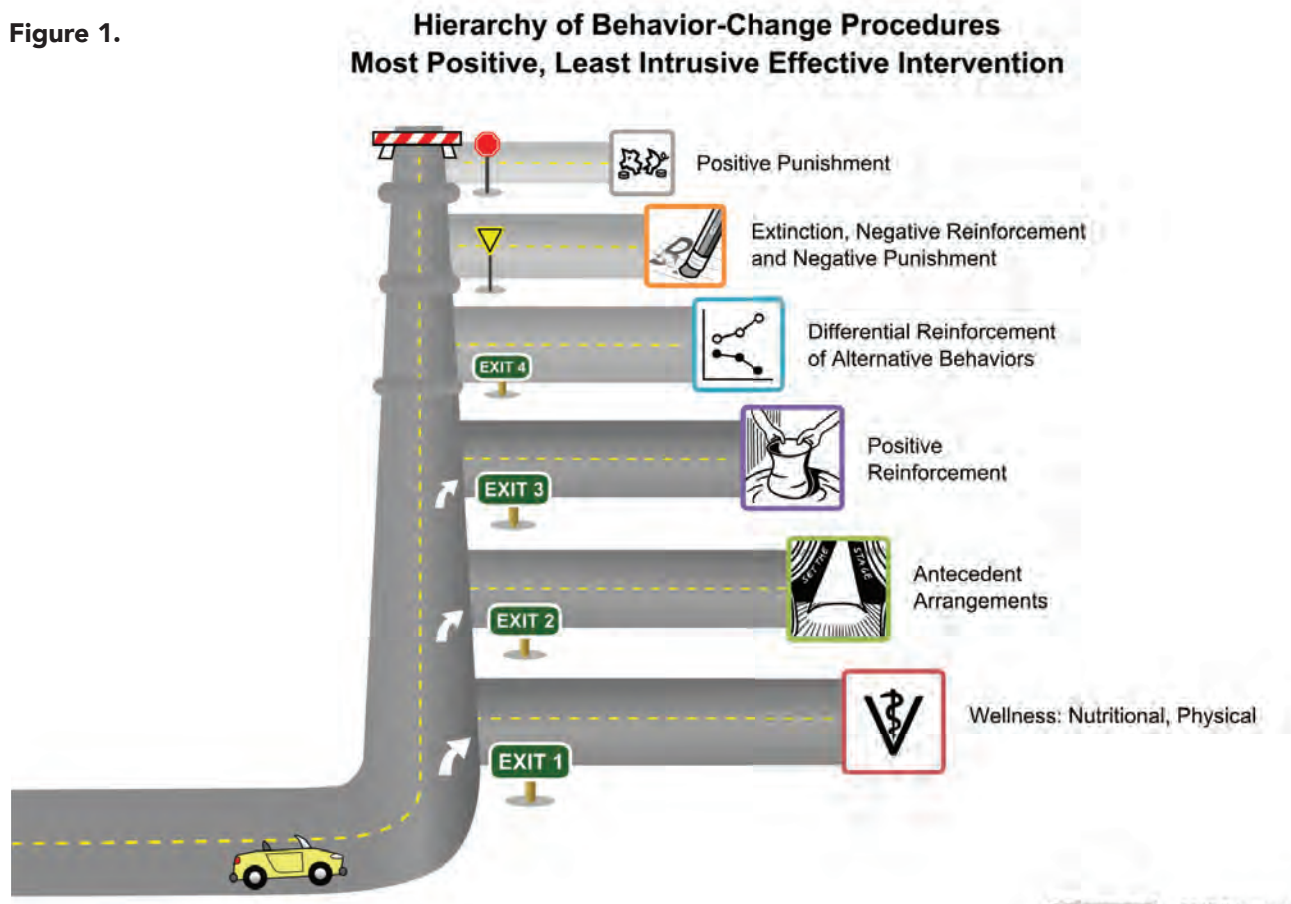
Choice, Control, and Empowerment

BY GIVING ANIMALS CHOICE AND CONTROL OVER OUTCOMES, WE BUILD THEIR CONFIDENCE.

In the shelter setting, dogs are provided few choices and rarely have control of outcomes. This lack of control causes an increase in stress. Providing animals choice can reduce problem behaviors (Shogren, et. al., 2004). The ability to control one's own outcomes is a primary *reinforcer* (Friedman, 2017). When providing enrichment opportunities, it is imperative that we provide shelter animals the choice to participate and the choice to leave or avoid certain enrichment activities. Positive interactions are not just about animals gaining valued rewards but also about having the power to make choices (Friedman, 2012). By providing animals choice and control over outcomes, we provide a better standard of care, minimize stress, and enhance their quality of life.

Not all dogs enjoy playing with other dogs. Forcing a dog who does not desire contact with other dogs into a playgroup gives them no way to avoid or escape a situation which causes them anxiety or fear, also known as "*flooding.*" *Flooding* does not reduce the level of fear; it can increase it (Staub, 1968). The practice has been considered inhumane and been largely abandoned in human-directed therapy settings for phobias and fears.

Give dogs the choice to opt-in to enrichment opportunities that suit the individual animal.

Flooding can lead to suppression of behavior and *learned helplessness* (Maier & Seligman, 1976). This is not an indication that the dog's behavior has been "fixed," although it appears that way because the dog is no longer showing overt signs of fear or aggression. However, temporary suppression is not an indication of long-term behavioral change or "rehabilitation."

Dogs that are forced into playgroups may avoid or even ignore other dogs in large groups, however once in a small group or with an individual dog, fearful or agonistic behaviors can appear. Unpleasant experiences in playgroups can lead to dogs developing negative *conditioned emotional responses (-CER)* about certain dogs or unknown dogs in general, handlers, the play yard, or leaving the kennel. All of which can have an impact on liability and the safety of dogs in the shelter and in the community.

Dogs who are not interested in participating in playgroups should be given the choice to opt-out, and to opt-in to an enrichment activity they enjoy. Dogs that avoid entering a playgroup, actively avoid other dogs, stand at the exit, or display agonistic behaviors when approached by other dogs in the group should be removed and provided with other forms of enrichment.

Getting Operationally Ready

Getting Started

Getting the organization on board

Key stakeholder engagement is critical to success

Deciding to implement playgroups is a significant undertaking, as it means leveling-up staff and volunteer knowledge of inter-dog play and communication behaviors, ensuring you have appropriate equipment, and tailoring the guidelines to suit your shelter. Involve key leaders, including veterinary staff, in discussions around the pros and cons of adding inter-dog playgroups to your shelter's enrichment program.
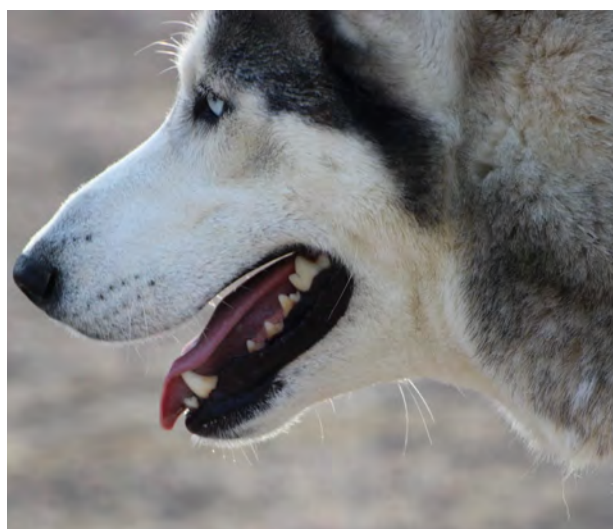
Education

Staff and Volunteers

Leading or participating in dog playgroups can be a fun task for staff and volunteers and can lead to increased satisfaction with and engagement in the organization.

Leading and managing dog playgroups is an advanced skill that requires a solid understanding of dog behavior and inter-dog communication. We recommend staff and volunteers are well-trained before running playgroups.

The **References and Further Reading** section of this guide lists some materials that can be used to train volunteers. Additionally, the videos posted to the **Shelter Playgroup Alliance YouTube channel** also provide education on inter-dog interactions and managing play.

Assessing your organization's risk tolerance

Your tolerance for risk will drive how you choose to implement these guidelines

Any time an organization allows multiple dogs to interact with each other some element of risk is involved. The extent to which individuals who run playgroups are willing to expose dogs, staff, and volunteers to risk varies. When assessing playgroup practices and the level of risk tolerance an organization allows, we examine the risk and benefit considerations for various practices.

	Low-Risk Tolerance	High-Risk Tolerance
Human-to-Dog Ratio	2:1 ratio of dogs-to-people For stable populations whose dog skills are well known, a 3:1 ratio can be low-risk	3:1 or greater number of dogs-to-handlers
Number of dogs in playgroups	Smaller groups, from 2-4 dogs	Groups of dogs from 4-6
Introductions in protected contact and semi-protected contact	Brief introductions in *protected contact*, re-introducing the dogs in *semi-protected contact*, and leaving leashes on during play.	Dropping leashes as soon as they enter the enclosure to allow approach at the dog own pace or move away from each other as desired
The Use of Food In Playgroups	Only offering food when dogs are a safe distance away from other dogs.	If your organization's population includes a high percentage of dogs who guard food from other dogs, using food in playgroups may come with a high risk of conflict between dogs.

# *Recommendations for roles and responsibilities*

Considering who and what to include in training for staff and volunteers

When running a playgroup, it is important to have defined roles for setting a clear communication structure. We recommend creating a single **playgroup lead** role with various playgroup support positions. The lead person is responsible for safety and comfort of the dogs, while playgroup support can assist in a variety of different functions, including dog handling.

Playgroup leads and **playgroup support** can be chosen via a variety of criteria. When choosing a **playgroup lead**, consider the most experienced staff or volunteers as that lead person is responsible for the safety and comfort of the dogs and handlers. For example, you may choose your playgroup leads by considering their experience or training with dogs, or a skill assessment, or physical ability. Identify individuals with a considerable amount of formal training in animal behavior and a deep understanding of the laws of learning. Consider having a staff person always be present to direct the playgroup, especially at first.

Playgroup support can include volunteers and staff with less experience, but a good foundation in dog behavior and knowledge of healthy inter-dog play and communication. Trained volunteers can participate as additional support for the playgroup and operate under the direction of the playgroup lead. When selecting volunteers, make sure to attend to the frequency and consistency of volunteer shifts. Volunteers who can continue to practice observation skills during play should be better prepared to intervene when necessary. Playgroup support can also take notes or enter them into the sheltering database.

A **volunteer in-training** can be designated to remove dogs from their kennel, bring them to the play yard, and return dogs to the kennel. The volunteer runner can place a harness on the dog prior to entry into the play space. A volunteer who is interested in supporting playgroups, but is inconsistent in their volunteer shifts can also play this role. Do note that playgroup leads may prefer to remove dogs from the kennel themselves to begin developing a relationship with the dog.
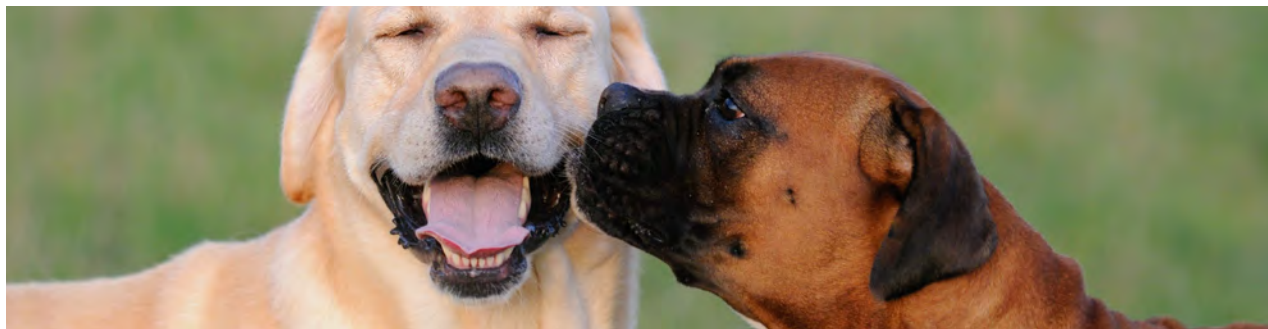
Sample Structure

The following structure is a sample list of training topics related to playgroups for staff and volunteers:

• Read and discuss a shelter-specific playgroup handbook, eligibility criteria for dogs, and specific roles and responsibilities for handlers.

• Discuss the purpose of playgroups in your organization, including for enrichment, building a behavioral repertoire (e.g. recalls, hand targeting), or for behavior modification.

• Learn about the LIMA ethical standard, review the humane hierarchy, and discuss a ladder of intervention for your shelter's playgroups.

• Review canine body language and play style materials, including how to assess if dogs are interested in continuing interactions and how to conduct a *consent test*.

• Identify when and how to intervene in dog play, when to rotate dogs, and how to introduce additional dogs into the playgroup.

• Review play yard logistics, including gate operation and management, fight kit supplies, and access to water.

• Practice emergency and fight protocols.

• Review how to capture notes and where to record playgroup information for inclusion in behavior notes.

If your shelter does not have certified dog behavior professionals to conduct training, you can contact us for support in developing a playgroup and enrichment behavior and training program.

Sample Levels

Consider the following sample of levels of skill and responsibility when evaluating staff and volunteers for involvement in playgroups. Levels provide additional training responsibilities and opportunities as experience grows.

Level 1: Takes dogs to playgroups; assists in monitoring; conducts other forms of enrichment

Level 2: Monitors play of established playgroup pairs

Level 3: Introduces new small dog pairs and monitor play of small dogs

Level 4: Introduces new dogs of any size

Level 5: Trains new staff and volunteers to run playgroups

Setting up the Play Space

Choosing a Play Yard

It doesn't need to be perfect

Careful setup of the environment can assist good inter-dog interactions. Even if you don't have an ideal yard at your shelter you can use the space available by adjusting the size of dogs, number of dogs in playgroups, adding play or agility equipment, and managing the space well. If you have a small yard available you can run play pairs instead of triads or play small groups of small dogs. If you have a larger yard, you can create a space with pools and obstacles for a larger playgroup with accompanying handlers. See the **Dog to Handler Ratios & Managing Arousal** section for more details.

Gates & Visual Barriers

*Optimal play spaces have gates with an *air lock* or an adjacent yard to quickly move dogs in and out of the play yard. Use covering on fences to provide a visual barrier that can facilitate the reduction of arousal.

Obstacles

Alternative Fun

Placing agility equipment, benches, or other obstacles into the environment can break up play, resulting in reduced arousal. Objects of varying heights can provide some alternatives to chase or wrestling, as well as allow dogs to adjust their level of engagement.

Pools

Breaks & Rehydration

Pools can provide dogs with a much needed break from the action as well as hydration. If possible, adding shade structures or trees can also assist in keeping dogs from overheating during warm weather. During colder seasons unfilled pools still provide a useful obstacle to provide breaks in play.

Equipment & Materials

Harnesses

Safety First

If possible, place harnesses with a drag line attached on the dogs in the playgroup. As a second option, place a light drag line onto a flat collar. For well-known play pairs or trios, consider removing the drag lines.

Radios

Communication is Key

Use cell phones or a radio system to communicate among handlers and runners. You may want to also consider video equipment to review play sessions as recorded materials can be helpful for debrief as well as training future handlers.

Fight Kit

Just in Case

Our LIMA-based guidelines set a context that reduces the chance of inter-dog aggression. However, always be prepared with a 'pig board', hose or bucket of water, bowls to make noise, gloves, and a *break stick* if you are trained in its use.

Drag lines

Have multiple lengths ready

Have a variety of leashes of different lengths so that you can gain control of dogs, as needed.

Treat Pouch

Be ready to reinforce

Always wear a treat pouch filled with food to reinforce desired behavior.

Squeaky Toy

A neutral interrupter

Instead of using your voice, use a small squeaky toy and condition the dogs to orient to you and recall to handlers when sounded.

Using Food in Playgroups

ALWAYS BE PREPARED TO BUILD DESIRED BEHAVIORS THROUGH POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT.

We recommend that handlers always wear a treat pouch filled with food and be skilled at reinforcing desired behaviors throughout dog interaction sessions. When used with skill, food should not elicit resource guarding behaviors. Depending on your shelter, you may determine that dogs who exhibit resource guarding behaviors may not be good candidates for playgroups.

Food is a primary ***reinforcer***, meaning most dogs find food to be reinforcing without any prior learning. The use of food can serve as a good assessment of the stress levels of the dogs in playgroups. Many dogs will stop taking treats when they are experiencing stress, fear, or are highly aroused. The rejection of food can be used as a sign that the dog may not be enjoying the interactions and may benefit more from a different form of enrichment. Food treats can also be used during playgroup to reinforce desired behaviors, such as recalls or taking breaks from play. These behaviors can provide dogs a great start on developing a repertoire of desirable behaviors and potentially increase their adoptability.

Reinforcing good play skills by using food during breaks can lead to a better experience for the dogs. A dog who can be called away from play to focus on a handler is a safer dog to have in playgroups and is a good skill for the dog to have for the adopter who may frequent dog parks.

Common concerns about the risk of using food in playgroups can be minimized by using some basic strategies. Shelters may use food differently in playgroups based on their risk tolerance. Below are some examples:

Low Risk Tolerance	High Risk Tolerance
Only use food in a playgroup when all dogs have been observed by a behavior and training professional around food and other dogs, and no guarding behaviors were observed.	Use food in all playgroups with all dogs, regardless of previous behavioral observations.
Only reward a dog when that dog is a large distance away from all other dogs.	Reward target dog when other dogs are in close proximity or reward multiple dogs at the same time.
Only permit the playgroup lead or highly experienced people to use food.	Allow every person in the playgroup yard to carry treats and use food to reward appropriate behaviors.

Managing Inter-Dog Play

Good Play

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? HOW CAN WE FACILITATE IT?

As a species, dogs are social animals and should be provided contact with *conspecifics*, or animals belonging to the same species, who enjoy such contact. However, it is important to note that each dog is an individual and may not enjoy interactions with *conspecifics*. While playgroups can be a form of enrichment for some dogs; they can be a stressful experience for others. Playgroups can also be effective for assessing dogs' social skills with other dogs, and in this sense can be important when making recommendations for adoption matching. However, inter-dog playgroups in shelters should always been seen as enrichment first and assessment last.

In addition to providing mental enrichment, physical enrichment, and novelty, inter-dog interactions can be a beneficial tool in developing a behavior modification plan. However, when using contact with other animals as part of a behavior modification strategy, groups of two, or dyads, are more beneficial than groups of three or more.

Good play consists of exaggerated movements and loose, unbalanced, curved, and bouncy bodies. Dogs engaged in good play have relaxed mouths, tails, and soft eyes. In good play, you see periodic play bows with bent elbows, and if there is mouthing, it is inhibited. Generally in healthy play there are frequent breaks, role reversal, taking turns chasing, and ground wrestling. When there are breaks, both dogs should seek re-engagement or rest in proximity to one another. If there is a size or skill disparity there will be some element of self-handicapping. Good play starts with selecting appropriate dogs, conducting good introductions, and continues with good playgroup management. The **Shelter Playgroup Alliance YouTube channel** features video of inter-dog play that highlights good play.

In the next section, we explore selecting dogs for playgroups, introducing dogs, and managing play using a LIMA-based approach.

Selecting Dogs

CAREFUL SELECTION OF DOGS CONTRIBUTES TO PLAYGROUP SUCCESS. MAINTAINING GOOD RECORDS SHOULD ASSIST IN FUTURE PAIRINGS.

Lead staff and volunteers running the playgroup for that day can create a list of dogs that are eligible for playgroups. We recommend that you consider the following criteria in determining dog eligibility:

• Available for adoption with no limiting health problems (e.g., kennel cough, amputation, hip or cruciate issues)

• Current on vaccines

• Not available for adoption, but has been behaviorally assessed (e.g., being held out for behavior modification)

• Dogs with a longer length of stay

• A known history of good inter-dog skills

Give yourself time before stating playgroup to plan your day, basing that on the amount of dogs you have at your shelter, the allotted time you have for groups and how many runners you will have for the day. Be sure to include and allot extra time for any playgroups which will include behavior modification sessions.

Similar dogs often make the best playmates. Pair by size, ability, and play preferences.

If you have a small shelter, you may be need to plan to take out 5-10 dogs. Schedule 20-30 minutes into your morning to create a list.

If you have a larger shelter, you may need to identify 25-40 dogs. Plan approximately an hour into your morning to create your potential play list.

Decide which playgroup eligible dogs you would like to get out to playgroup for the day.

Go through each playgroup eligible dog's notes in your database to pair them with each other appropriately.

- Match by size which is beneficial for safety reasons.

- Match energy levels and refer to the **Arousal** section to prevent high energy dogs from tipping from play to conflict.

- Match similar play preferences, if known. Pairing dogs of varying play styles can also be successful and beneficial, as long as both dogs are enjoying the interaction. Refer to the **Assessing "Good" Play** section for more information.

- Match relative age. Pairing dogs of varying ages can also be successful and beneficial, as long as both dogs are enjoying the interaction. Refer to the **Assessing "Good" Play** section for more.

Prior to finalizing your daily play list, check the animals' records to ensure there are no medical or behavioral memos indicating the animal should not participate. Depending on your population of dogs, try to pair opposite sex dogs first. If there are no good matches then try a male to male pairing. If there are no good matches for either of those, try two females.

Use past histories as guidelines to evaluate whether a dog would benefit from playgroup and, if yes, what types of play partners are ideal. For example, two mellow dogs that rest in proximity to one another is still enriching for those dogs, as long as they are showing no signs of avoidance, and are practicing good social skills. If a pair ends up not being a good match, note it on your records so other playgroup volunteers and staff do not repeat the pairing. See the **Documentation** section for sample data sheets.

In a study of on-leash dog interactions in a neighborhood, it was found that dogs of the same sex threatened each other nearly three times more often than dogs of the opposite sex. Both sexes bit dogs of the same sex more than five times more often than dogs of the opposite sex (Rezac, et al., 2011). If a fight did occur it was more serious among female pairs than mixed sex or inter-male fights (Sherman, et al., 1996). Bauer & Smuts (2007) found contradictory evidence in their research which indicates that there are no sex differences in inter-canine interactions. Possible discrepancies in the findings may be related to the choice of subjects.

Although these data were not collected in the same conditions as a shelter, it does suggest that mixed sex pairings may have a higher chance of success and a lower chance of injury.

Sex and Play Partner Preference: A Peek Into Some Relevant Data.

In group play with puppies, it was found that they developed preferred playmates. Sherman, et. al., (1996) also found that in adult dogs, play is not perfectly balanced; instead one dog typically has more "wins" than another. The authors suggest that this data indicates that self-handicapping and play signalling may function together to encourage play (Bauer & Smuts, 2007). Males in male-female dyads also displayed self-handicapping more often than females and, as indicated above, self-handicapping correlates with play signalling and appears to function to maintain play.

Again, these data were not collected in the same conditions as a shelter, but suggest that some traditional notions of balanced play may not be as important as ensuring that both dogs consent and enjoy the play interaction.

Introducing Dogs

**GOOD INTRODUCTIONS SET THE TONE FOR THE REMAINDER OF INTERACTIONS AMONG DOGS.
DOGS ARE ALWAYS LEARNING; BE CAREFUL TO PROTECT THEIR EXPERIENCES.**

We recommend conducting initial and brief introductions in *protected contact*, such as through a fence. Then, if the dogs appear to want to play and exhibit appropriate social signalling, handlers can then place them in harnesses or attach drag lines to their collars. In cases with dogs who have a history of barrier frustration, it can be beneficial to start the introduction by walking two dogs parallel to one another from a safe distance, such as across a parking lot. Once the dogs show lower levels of arousal, an introduction through a barrier can be attempted.

After the initial meet dogs can then greet in *semi-protected contact*, with a leash attached to harness or collar, and the handlers holding the leash. Handlers should take great care to keep leashes loose at all times to avoid any corrections or pressure.

If dogs are engaging in continued pro-social behavior and appear to want further interaction by displaying loose bodies, lifting paws, soft tail wags with long, wide sweeps, bent elbows, body wiggling, offering of play bows, soft eyes, and ears back without tension, then the playgroup lead can direct dropping of the leashes, if and when appropriate.

If at any time either of the dogs has a still body, hard stare, forward ears, lip tension, high-carried tail with a tense wag, or growls, gives a tooth display, engages in humping that continues after interruption, seeks escape, or avoids the other dog, then do not move forward with the play pair. There may be an alternative dog that would be an appropriate play mate, or the dog may not wish to engage in a playgroup.

We suggest that handlers have a word that is accepted as a stop button. For example, if a dog becomes rude, pushy, or inappropriate, end the session immediately by saying "stop," and both dogs should be removed from the play area. After removal, playgroup facilitators should discuss their observations and plan next steps.

Dogs should always enjoy their play time. If not, then play is not an appropriate form of enrichment for that animal. If dogs are subjected to non-consensual interactions, the negative lessons that they learn during play have long lasting and negative consequences after adoption.

Conducting a Consent Test

DOGS SHOULD ALWAYS CONSENT TO ALL INTERACTIONS. IF NOT, THEN IT'S NOT ENRICHING.

Consent tests are used to identify if animals are enjoying the interaction. Conducting content tests during inter-dog play is important, as play behaviors mimic those found in reproduction, food acquisition, and conflict. It is important to determine whether each individual participating wants to continue to do so.

To better understand an individual's willingness to wish to continue the interaction, those supervising the play should remove both, or all, dogs from the interaction. Use one or more of the following strategies to remove the dogs from the interaction:

1.   Call away with a trained cue, like the squeaky toy, and then provide food

2.   Gently guide the dogs away using the leash, and provide food

Once the dogs are separated, and focused on their handlers, release the dogs and observe their behavior. Are both parties choosing to engage by closing distance with each other? If that is the case, then allow the interaction to continue. If one or more of the dogs engage in any displacement or avoidance behaviors, then discontinue the interaction and identify another activity would be more enriching for that animal.

Dog to Handler Ratios & Managing Arousal

Inter-dog play generally occurs in a dyad, or between two dogs (Käufer, 2014). For that reason, we recommend that the maximum size of a playgroup vary between four and six dogs. We recommend maintaining a 1:2 ratio of dogs to handlers and a ensuring that a minimum of two handlers be present at all times; at no time should there be two dogs and one handler present.

The role of each handler, whether lead or support, is to pay close attention to dog interactions. The use of cell phones (except to communicate with playgroup support), photography equipment, or any other distraction by active handlers is not recommended. If the playgroup is to be videoed or photographed for marketing purposes, the video or photographs will be taken by an additional person in order to ensure the maintenance of a 1:2 ratio of active handlers to dogs.

Great care should always be taken to ensure that all dogs are enjoying the play sessions. If at any point in time dogs become uncomfortable or begin to show avoidance or aggression, the play session should end immediately. Do not allow the dogs to 'work it out' for themselves.

Importantly, learning how to be called away from play is a critical skill for dogs to develop. Dogs should be called away from play at a regular cadence and reinforced. For example, the playgroup lead may decide to call dogs away from play every 30 second or once per minute. After all dogs have been called away they should be reinforced by a handler and then sent back to play. Each handler should reinforce no more than two dogs at a time in order to manage potential resource guarding.

Assessing "Good" Play

In order to maintain good play you will need to build in breaks to prevent high arousal. Breaks can be initiated by encouraging movement away from other dogs with the help of squeakers, handler movement in opposite directions, and recall games. After a break, conduct a *consent test*. Below are behaviors to look out for during play. Green behaviors indicate good play. Yellow behaviors are ones to watch closely and be prepared to intervene in, especially if they occur with frequency or increased duration. Red behaviors are ones that require immediate intervention and cessation of play; such behaviors might lead to the development of behavior modification plans for individual dogs.

Green

- 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

- 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

- 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

Shelter Playgroup Alliance YouTube Channel

A picture is worth a thousand words

While the list above is a good reference, nothing substitutes for seeing dogs at play. Subscribe to the Shelter Playgroup Alliance YouTube channel, where you will find videos on inter-dog play that accompany these guidelines.

Playgroups for Modifying Behavior

IN ADDITION TO ENRICHMENT, INTER-DOG PLAY SESSIONS CAN BE A PART OF BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION.

Carefully managed playgroups can help dogs with a play skill deficit learn positive skills for their future home if there is an appropriate and tolerant player. If you do use an appropriate and tolerant player, be careful not to overuse that animal for behavior modification play sessions, as it could result in a negative *conditioned emotional response (-CER)* to other dogs.

Dogs with a play skill deficit are often pushy and physical in play, and may need assistance taking breaks or shifting activities during the course of the play session. See the section on **Shaping Appropriate Inter-dog Interactions** for guidance on how to shape positive play behaviors.

This type of playgroup for behavior modification requires an advanced knowledge of inter-canine body language, proactive play interruption skills to prevent escalation, and behavior modification and training concepts and techniques to create a safe and consenting environment for all canines involved. Regularly conduct a *consent test* to ensure that all dogs are still enjoying the interaction.

Fearful dogs who are pro-social with *conspecifics* can greatly benefit from the company and presence of well-adjusted and confident dogs in a playgroup setting. This practice also provides an opportunity for fearful dogs to engage in *social learning* around new people and new environments.

Shaping Appropriate Inter-Dog Interactions

Dogs can be taught to play more appropriately with others via careful monitoring and intervention. This work is advanced training and should be undertaken by those who have good skill in reading canine behavior as well as good training skills. Start by setting the dog up for success by teaching them a solid alternative behavior, like a hand target, prior to introduction to another dog. Then, when introducing your target dog to other dogs conduct several sessions of Look at That (LAT) (McDevitt, 2007), Behavior Adjustment Training (BAT) (Stewart, 2012, 2016) , or some form of desensitization and counter-conditioning exercise from a distance. During the process of shaping of appropriate behavior, dogs should be able to interact with their handler and the environment without fixation upon the other dog.

Depending on the motivation of the dog, like fear or frustration, you may also need to work on exercises that develop a repertoire of calm behavior around other dogs, like check-ins or a relax on a mat (Arthur, 2009). Once you know that your target dog can be around another dog and continue to display relaxed, comfortable behavior that is not intently focused on the other dog, which is often described as *under-threshold*, build up to parallel walking, and eventually allow one dog to sniff the other dog. Always reinforce the calm behavior. Often if you can allow each dog to investigate the other without a face-to-face greeting, things progress more smoothly.

Regularly prompt the alternative behavior (e.g., hand target), reward, and send the dog back to the interaction. Gradually increase the duration of the interaction, and progress onto short play sessions. For dogs with play skill deficits, capitalize on focus and attention and combine training sessions into play sessions. You can later use play as a *reinforcer* for training sessions.

Managing Inter-Dog Conflict
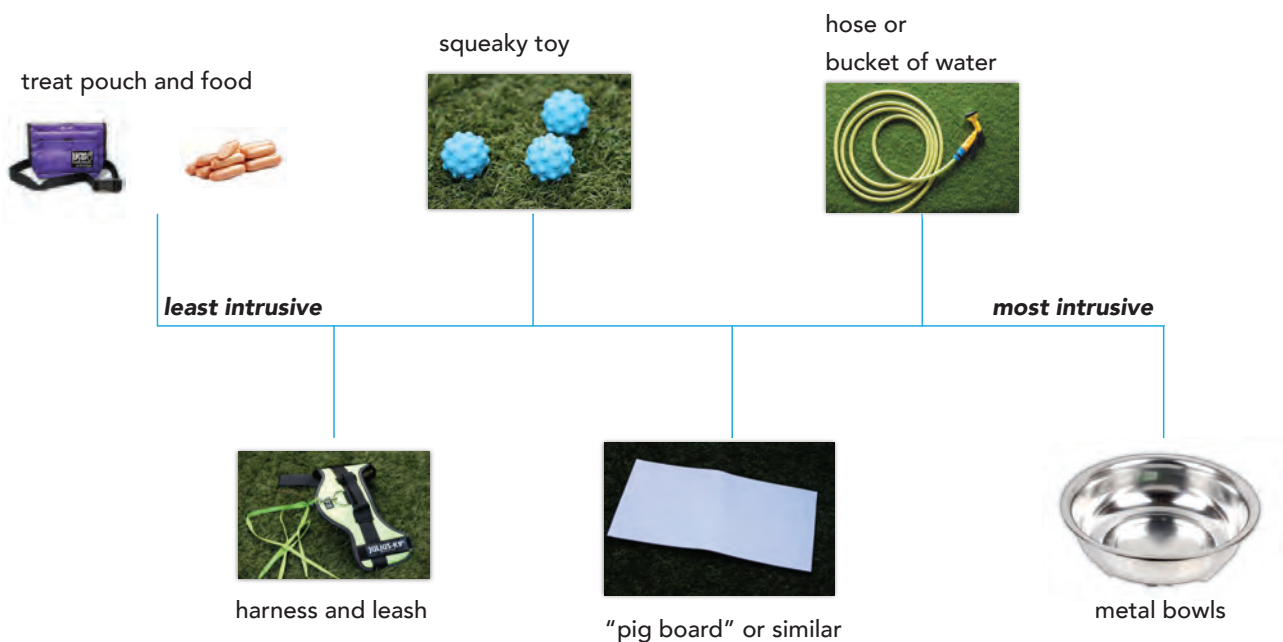
LIMA-based options for managing conflict

Inter-dog conflict can be minimized by monitoring the dogs' body language, calling dogs away from each other at the first sign of conflict, removing them, and identifying a better play or enrichment opportunity.

When dogs have begun to threaten each other placing a visual barrier, such as a large piece of stiff cardboard or the top of a large plastic container, often referred to as a "pig board", between the dogs while handlers gain control of the animals to remove them from the situation.

If the interaction continues, escalate to a hose or bucket of water sprayed above the dogs, then to their faces. If the interaction continues, then use metal bowls to make noise either by clanging them together or against a fence.

If you need to escalate to a hose or loud noise, recognize that the use of a punisher may have a negative impact on other dogs in the vicinity.

Playgroup management tools: Least to most intrusive

treat pouch and food

squeaky toy

hose or bucket of water

least intrusive

most intrusive

harness and leash

"pig board" or similar

metal bowls

Documentation

Documentation: Each Group

KEEPING GOOD GROUP RECORDS IS A KEY TO LONG TERM SUCCESS.

Below is a sample data sheet to be filled out each time the playgroup team runs play sessions. Following the play session, the observations can be documented in the shelter system.

Playgroup Log

Date:_____ Time: _____ Playgroup lead:_____

Playgroup support:_____

Dog name	Kennel	A-number	Sex	Observations specific to this animal

"Red" behaviors observed:

Avoided interactions with _____

Bullying or ganging up on_____

Stiff or tense interactions with_____

Escalating arousal levels _____

Targeting a specific dog _____

Predation _____

Constant and unrelenting arousal _____

Other general observations:

Documentation: Each Dog

KEEPING GOOD RECORDS IS A KEY TO LONG TERM SUCCESS.

Below is a sample data sheet to be filled out for each animal as a running log. Following the play session, the observations can be documented in the shelter system.

Individual Dog Playgroup Log

Dog Name:_____ A-number: _____ Location:_____

Dog's playmate(s)	Date	A-number	Observations specific to this pairing

"Red" behaviors observed:

Avoided interactions with _____

Bullying or ganging up on_____

Stiff or tense interactions with_____

Escalating arousal levels _____

Targeting a specific dog _____

Predation _____

Constant and unrelenting arousal _____

Other general observations:

Non-Playgroup-Based Enrichment

Alternative Enrichment Opportunities

DOGS SHOULD BE EMPOWERED TO CHOOSE THE ENRICHMENT IN WHICH THEY PARTICIPATE.

Enrichment is an essential part of care for sheltered animals. Enrichment opportunities should allow the animal to engage in positive species-specific behaviors, and for canines, opportunities for sniffing, chewing, and positive social time with humans should be prioritized. The spirit of enrichment is to "let them be dogs!". This means structuring the environment such that the dog's individual needs are being met as much as possible. It's important to remember that enrichment is an individual preference; what is enriching for one dog may not be enriching for another.

Safety and risk

Each organization will have to consider their risk tolerance when creating an enrichment program; safety considerations and enrichment must work together to make the program possible.

Low Risk Tolerance	High Risk Tolerance
Educate all volunteers and staff on enrichment. Ask all staff to report any safety concerns.	Co-house dogs while taking necessary precautions to prevent conflict.
Teach volunteers and staff how to avoid resource guarding.	Allow unsupervised enrichment items in the kennel overnight.
Create a clear sanitation protocol for enrichment items. If using a dishwasher or cleaning solution, then only use disposable enrichment items.	Allow the use of "fluffy" toys that are more difficult to sanitize.

If your organization does not currently have an enrichment program, getting started can seem like a large undertaking. Your organization can begin by choosing to implement one or two enrichment strategies that are most feasible given your current resources. You may consider the ways in which you can garner support from volunteers, donors, grant-making organizations, and your local community.

Forms of enrichment that don't require hands-on interaction with the animals in your care can provide expanded opportunities for volunteers who may not have the physical ability, or be old enough, to walk dogs or manage playgroups, but can work with dogs in protected contact or make enrichment items for the animals. Local schools or scouting organizations may be able to engage in special enrichment projects like creating digging pits and building agility equipment.

The acquisition of enrichment items can be done by posting requests on social media and creating an Amazon Wish List. Pet supply vendors can be great source of discounted enrichment supplies and local hardware stores can be a great source of do-it-yourself enrichment supplies.

If you are looking for additional inspiration beyond this section, visit a local Association of Zoos and Acquariums (AZA)- accredited organization. Keepers are often implementing creative enrichment strategies that might spark your imagination.

Potential types of enrichment

In-kennel	Out-of-Kennel
Kongs and food dispensers	Lick mats
Puzzle toys	Environmental foraging
Nylabones and chew toys	Busy buckets and boxes
Click for quiet	Flirt poles
Co-housing dogs that get along	Frisbees and tennis balls
Soft toys and stuffies	Agility yard
Blankets and kuranda beds	Baby pools and sprinklers
Clicker training games	Digging pits
Music	Off-site outings, day trips and sleep overs
Real-life rooms	Scent-based enrichment
Human interaction	Human interaction through clicker training games

Shelter Enrichment Ideas

ENRICHMENT CAN TAKE MANY FORMS. WE ARE ONLY LIMITED BY OUR IMAGINATION.

Food-based enrichment: Leverage the dogs' daily food allotment by presenting it in novel ways to provide mental enrichment. If operationally possible, divide daily meals into two portions and change food delivery from a bowl to food dispensing toys, paper bag "lunches", or busy buckets. A busy bucket is made by filling a sanitized food container with the animals' regular food, treats, and a liquid, either water or broth, and then frozen.

Environmental: Add novel sights, sounds, or smells to provide environmental stimulation. Sounds can include relaxing music or audio books. Real-life rooms with couches and household items can also be enriching. Soft bedding for appropriate dogs can add comfort and a different substrate in the kennel. Safely introducing scents for short periods of time, which can include natural lavender, natural vanilla, or leaves from a garden that the dog has not visited. Be careful to avoid chemical or commercialized scents, which can be overwhelming for dogs' sensitive noses. Consider building a sensory garden with different substrates, visual stimuli, scents, and activities for dogs, which can include a shallow pool, vertical spaces, trees, bushes, and non-toxic plants.

Toy-based play: Toys with which dogs can interact, chase, paw, and chew can provide great mental enrichment. Toys or peanut-butter smeared bones in the kennels for appropriate dogs can be beneficial. Adding baby pools, sprinklers, or a digging pit to an outdoor area can provide enrichment, as well. Attach an appropriate object to a cord, such as a stuffed animal, ball, or bandana. Then attach the other side of the cord to a PVC pipe to create a flirt pole. Handlers then bring the toy to "life" by dragging it on the ground gently and allow the dog to "win" at the game by chasing and catching the object. Be sure to take care to not facilitate over-arousal when playing this game.

Non-play-based inter-dog socialization: Consider co-housing dogs that have been known to get along together. This can be a high-risk endeavor if not approached with due caution, but can be beneficial for many dogs. Ensure that the living space allows dogs time away from each other when needed. Separate dogs when they eat or have access to other resources.

In- and out-of-kennel training: *Click for Quiet* and other variations of the protected contact clicker game can be helpful in making and reinforcing desired kennel behavior. Consider hanging treat containers on the outside of each kennel that say "give me a treat for four paws on the ground or wagging my tail."

Human interactions: Ask volunteers, staff, and visitors to help walk a dog every day and incorporate short clicker training sessions into those interactions. A "real life room" can be used for breaks from the kennel, and can be good locations to each a relax on a mat or read a book with a dog. Consider increasing the public's access to dogs through short-term fostering or lunch-time walks with employees of local businesses.

Physical exercise: Provide dogs with opportunities to yards where they can be off-leash. Be sure that all handlers are leveraging the environment to limit over-arousal, as well. Jog-a-dog programs in partnership with local running groups can be beneficial for some dogs who have the stamina, physical ability, and desire to run. Be careful to balance that extra physical exercise with low-impact mental enrichment, as well.

Species-typical behaviors: Behaviors that are typical for dogs include chewing, digging, chasing, shredding, scenting, burrowing, socializing with humans, socializing with other dogs, and playing. There are many inexpensive ways to create these opportunities for dogs. Consider reusing and recycling materials, like cardboard boxes, sterilized food containers, towels, and fabric to create opportunities for dogs to use their noses, tear things apart, chew, and dig. The K9 Nosework Shelter Project is a great resource for bringing nosework to your shelter. Visit their website at https://www.k9nosework.com/workshops/k9-nose-work-shelter-project for more information.

Facts About Inter-Dog Play

Addressing Misconceptions About Play

THERE ARE A LOT OF BELIEFS ABOUT INTER-DOG INTERACTIONS THAT MAY NOT BE TRUE.

Truth Levels	
True in all circumstances	A statement that is always true, and there is a good body of peer-reviewed scientific evidence to support the statement. *For example, domestic dogs use complex social communication signals.*
True in most circumstances	A statement that may be true in many circumstance, and there is some peer-reviewed scientific evidence to support the statement. Anecdotal evidence may support this claim. *For example, left- versus right-tail wags have specific meaning.*
True in limited circumstances	A statement that may be true in limited circumstance, and there may be no scientific evidence to support the statement. Anecdotal evidence may refute this claim. *For example, all dogs consider beef hot dogs to be high value reinforcers.*
Not true	A statement that is the opinion of the author that has no supporting evidence, anecdotal or otherwise. In some cases the preponderance of the peer-reviewed scientific evidence indicates the contrary. *For example, dogs have strict dominance or social hierarchies.*

Misconception	Truth Level and Actual Facts
Spending time in playgroups reduces stress for shelter dogs.	**True in limited circumstances.** If the off-leash activity is enjoyable and an enrichment activity that the dog chooses to participate in, then the activity can reduce stress. However, if the dog is forced to participate in interactions with other dogs when they are fearful of the specific dogs, or dogs in general, that is considered flooding and is very stressful. See the **Choice, Control and Empowerment** section for more detail.
Playgroups are necessary for dogs to learn.	**Not true.** The ability to learn new information is not contingent on participation in playgroups. The ability to gain new information is contingent on low-to-moderately stressful activities that provide mental enrichment, which can include positive reinforcement based training, walks with volunteers or staff, nosework, or well-run playgroups . A balance of mental and physical activities that do not include overexertion are the best options for limiting high stress for shelter dogs. See the **Arousal** section for more detail.

Misconception	Truth Level and Actual Facts
Socially healthy dogs can be more effective trainers than humans and we should use them to teach other dogs how to play.	**True in limited circumstances.** Dogs are more adept at reading canine communication signals than we are. However, forcing a behaviorally healthy and socially appropriate dog to interact with a non-behaviorally and socially inappropriate dog can end up causing behavioral issues in that stable dog. It is better for the handlers involved to (1) become excellent readers of canine communication; (2) help socially inappropriate dogs make good choices; (3) reinforce those good choices to strengthen the appropriate behavior. See the **Shaping Appropriate Inter-dog Interactions** section for more detail.
We should allow dogs to "work it out", and not intervene.	**Not true.** If we allow dogs to "work it out", it can often result in more conflict than is necessary. If the inter-dog interactions are conflict laden, then it minimizes the benefit of dog interactions as an enrichment option. Alternatively, calling a dog away from a stressful situation, and reinforcing the dog for that recall, is an important skill to build for both dogs and handlers.
Dogs are accustomed to live in groups, this social time with other dogs can minimize behavioral deterioration, and speed up behavior modification.	**True in limited circumstances.** While domestic dogs are a social species with well-developed social communication skills, they have been selectively bred to live with people. Research on village or feral dog communities indicates that those populations generally form loose social groups of not more than six dogs. Individual dogs as members of that social species may or may not have good, or well-developed, social skills as a result of their learning history. Depending on the individual animal, time spent in playgroups may not may not have a positive impact on that dog's behavior
The majority of dogs can participate in playgroups. Even if the dogs do not want to participate, it can be beneficial to have them join playgroups.	**Not true.** The number of dogs who choose to participate in playgroups, and who are physically healthy enough to do so, will fluctuate as the shelter population shifts. If the playgroup enrichment activity is enjoyable and an enrichment activity that the dog chooses to participate in, then the activity can reduce stress. However, if the dog is forced to participate in interactions with other dogs when they are fearful of the specific dogs, or dogs in general, that is considered flooding. Subjecting a dog to flooding will not assist in the maintenance or development of social skills; on the contrary, you run the risk of increasing the level of fear and increasing the chance of aggression or avoidance. See the **Choice, Control, and Empowerment** section for more detail.

Addressing Misconceptions About Play

… CONTINUATION OF THE PREVIOUS SECTION

Misconception	Truth Level and Actual Facts
Staff and volunteers with no formal training can do an excellent job running playgroups. Some people have an innate ability to work with dogs in groups.	**Not true.** Managing well-run playgroups is an advanced skill and requires formal training in canine communication signals and inter-dog play as well as experience managing playgroups. There is no evidence for a genetic predisposition for successful management of dogs in groups. See the **Getting Started** section for more information on training as well as roles and responsibilities for staff and volunteers.
It's beneficial to include puppies in playgroups.	**True in limited circumstances.** While positive dog social interactions can be beneficial for puppies, including puppies in general playgroups can result in some potentially overwhelming experiences that can have a significant, negative, and long term impact on the puppy's behavioral health.
Do not micromanage the dogs or you run the risk of creating unnecessary tension. Limit interactions, such as petting, so that the dogs can remain focused on their time with one another.	**Not true.** Successful management of a well-run playgroup often requires redirecting over-arousal, teaching dogs how to take breaks, and reinforcing appropriate behavior. Using petting, praise, or food when a dog returns to the handler during a break from play is encouraged and can help set the dog up for success in the home. See the **Dog to Handler Ratios and Managing Arousal** section for more detail.
Use a consistent negative marker such as "eh-eh" or "enough" in order to communicate with the dogs. Teach them that this verbal marker will precede an interruption or correction so that they learn to settle down with just a verbal marker.	**Not true.** There is no such thing as a "negative marker" in behavioral science. Additionally, the same cue cannot be used to prompt different behavior (interrupt [redirect behavior] or 'correct' [meaning deliver an aversive stimulus in an attempt to punish]) is confusing to the animal and simply bad training. One can, however, condition a stimulus to mean that an aversive stimulus is coming, which is called a "conditioned punisher". In order to maintain the strength of a conditioned punisher, an aversive stimulus must always follow. If not, the conditioned punisher may lose its meaning and revert to being a neutral stimulus. The early and consistent use of aversives has no place in a LIMA-based playgroup environment. Calling a dog away from a stressful situation, and reinforcing the dog for that recall, is an important skill to build for both dogs and handlers.

Misconception	Truth Level and Actual Facts
Use your body to block dogs.	**True in limited circumstances.** It can be potentially dangerous to use your body to block dogs, as well it's potential to be used as aversive "pressure" to manipulate behavior through negative reinforcement. It is safer and less aversive to use a large piece of poster board to split dogs, if necessary.
There are four common play styles: gentle + dainty; rough + rowdy; push + pull; seek + destroy.	**Not true.** There is no evidence for "common play styles." Dogs with good inter-dog social skills will be able to negotiate appropriate play, and engage in good communication with each other. Rather than labeling dogs as having a "play style", we should focus on helping dogs engage in healthy inter-dog interactions. See the **Good Play** section for more detail.
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.	**Not true.** This statement implies that the use of punishment is warranted. Dogs may exhibit learned helplessness due to flooding and thereby have a limited behavioral repertoire. And, dogs can become exceptionally stressed, and their appetite may be reduced, which is often as a result of stress-induced anorexia. The use of punishment will not improve conditions for these animals. Any stimulus can become a conditioned punisher, which indicates that an aversive stimulus is coming. We often refer to that process as "poisoning" the stimulus, if the stimulus was previously appetitive. This process is due to pairing the stimulus with an aversive, and not due specifically to the shelter environment.
Head halters can serve as a level of suppression for an exuberant dog that comes on too strongly at first.	**True in limited circumstances.** In order to suppress behavior, the stimulus (in this case, a head halter), must be sufficiently aversive. The early and consistent use of aversives has no place in a LIMA-based playgroup environment.
Nyon muzzles, sized up, so that it fits loosely is preferred for playgroups.	**Not true.** Nylon muzzles, if sized up, will still allow a dog to grab a hold of another dog or person and cause injury. If a muzzle is to be used, a basket muzzle, like a Baskerville, is preferred for safety and comfort. Additionally, the muzzle must be properly introduced so that it is not an aversive stimulus to the dog.

Addressing Misconceptions About Play

... CONTINUATION OF THE PREVIOUS SECTION

Misconception	Truth Level and Actual Facts
Social statuses include: playful, dog social; un-socialized; fearful; prey-like; tolerant; dominant; defensive; offensive.	**Not true.** There is no evidence for this type of social hierarchy. Further, many of these labels describe specific behavior that any dog can display at any time given the right context.
The goal of playgroups 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.	**Not true.** The goal of playgroups is to provide enrichment for dogs who find inter-dog play enjoyable. Forcing a behaviorally healthy and socially appropriate dog to interact with a non-behaviorally and socially inappropriate dog can end up causing behavioral issues in that (now formally) stable dog. It is better for the handlers involved to (1) become excellent readers of canine communication; (2) help socially inappropriate dogs make good choices; (3) reinforce those good choices to strengthen the appropriate behavior. If we allow dogs to "work it out", it can often result in more conflict than is necessary. If the inter-dog interactions are conflict laden, then it minimizes the benefit of dog interactions as an enrichment option.
Corrections and other aversives are no different than what an owner will use on their dog.	**True in limited circumstances**. Some average companion dog owners may use aversives at some point in their pets lives. The availability of aversives does not eliminate the fallout of their use, including avoidance, offensive, defensive and redirected Aggression, generalization of fear, apathy, learned helplessness and injury. Organizations who adhere to the LIMA ethical standard will avoid risking the fallout of aversives and educate dog owners to do the same.
Punishment can be used under strict guidelines if you properly train your staff.	**Not true.** It has been said that punishment is reinforcing to the punisher. You punish a dog to make a behavior stop, the behavior stops in the moment, and you are reinforced for your application of punishment. Behavior that is reinforced is more likely to repeat and intensify over time. This means that over time, those doing the punishing punish more frequently and more harshly than before. No amount of "checks and balances" can prevent this natural progression of animal behavior.

Misconception	Truth Level and Actual Facts
Putting a stressed dog in playgroup is better than euthanizing a dog for lack of trying.	**Not true.** Playgroups can be beneficial for many dogs, but not all. For those dogs that show stressed in playgroups, prolonged exposure to the stress of playgroups may have unintended long-term effects. Healthy playgroups avoid flooding dogs. Keeping a stressed dog in playgroups runs the risk of eliciting exaggerated behaviors from the very dog you are trying to save. Dogs with escalated behavior problems tend to be more challenging to safely and successfully place.
If you're not using aversives, then you're probably only including your easy dogs. You're not even beginning to work with your most at risk in your population.	**Not true.** Healthy playgroups prioritize consent from all participants. Healthy playgroups should feel easy in this sense. Playgroups that disregard consent are unhealthy, unstable and unsafe. Some of the most at-risk dogs in your shelter will benefit from playgroups, but not all. Those that are not candidates for playgroups would be better served by alternative enrichment opportunities and behavior modification prior to attempting to reintroduce to playgroups.

Glossary, References, and Resources

Glossary of Terms

Air lock: In the shelter setting, an air lock refers to a system of double gating, where there is a small space in-between two gates that is a safety area to prevent loose animals during a transition from one area to the next.

Appetitive stimulus: A stimulus that an animal enjoys, e.g. a slice of cheese or a ball. An appetitive stimulus does not necessarily reinforce behavior.

Aversive stimulus (aversive or aversives): A stimulus that an animal dislikes, and may avoid, e.g. the noise from a shake can or the pain associated with a prong (pinch) collar.

Break stick: A hard wood or hard plastic implement used to facilitate the opening of a dog's mouth by inserting the tool at the back of the jaw, between the molars, and twisting.

Classical conditioning: Also referred to as respondent conditioning, or respondent learning, classical conditioning refers to learning through the pairing of, or association with, stimuli. For example, if a dog experiences fear as a result of the activation of a startle response in the presence of another dog, that feeling of fear is paired with that second dog.

Click for Quiet: A clicker training strategy which marks any desired behavior that is in alignment with "calm" or "quiet" behavior. This can include marking and reinforcing soft eyes, closed mouth, all paws on the ground, soft body, wagging tail, or any other pro-social and calm behavior.

Conditioned emotional response (CER): A learned emotional response to a stimulus as a result of classical conditioning. CERs can be positive or negative in valence. Positive conditioned emotional responses (+CER) are often described as feelings of happiness or happy anticipation of a desired outcome, e.g. the presence of another dog signals that fun will be had. Negative conditioned emotional responses (-CER) are often described as feelings of dread or fear of an aversive outcome, e.g. the presence of another dog signals that aggression may occur.

Consent test: The process of identifying if an animal is still enjoying an activity. For inter-dog play, remove the dogs from the play situation, and then release them to return. If both dogs return to play, then they are saying "yes". If one or both dogs avoid interacting with the other dog, then the answer is "no".

Conspecific: Member of ones own species.

Dyad: A group of two or a pair.

Flooding: Exposure to a fear-eliciting stimulus at full strength. If a dog is fearful of other dogs, placing that animal in a yard with other dogs is considered flooding. Flooding is considered an in-humane practice, and often deepens the level of fear experienced by the animal. Flooding often results in learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness: Occurs when an animal is repeatedly subjected to an aversive stimulus that it cannot escape. Over time, the animal will stop trying to avoid the stimulus, and will have a limited behavioral repertoire. Often, animals in a state of learned helplessness will look calm or relaxed when in fact they are in a state of fear. For example, If a dog is fearful of other dogs, placing that animal in a yard with other dogs is considered flooding and the animal subsequently 'stops behaving'. which is actually a state of learned helplessness.

Operant conditioning: The learning process by which the frequency of a behavior is increased or decreased as a result of the consequences for that behavior. Behavior strengthening procedures are termed "reinforcement" and behavior weakening or behavioral suppression is termed "punishment."

Protected contact: Referring to any human-animal or animal-animal interaction that occurs with a protective barrier, such as a fence.

Semi-protected contact: Referring to any human-animal or animal-animal interaction that occurs with some protection restricting access, such as a leash or muzzle.

Reinforcer: A stimuli provided to a learner post-behavior that serves the function for strengthening, or reinforcing, that behavior. For example, a toy may be appetitive for a specific dog, but providing the toy to the dog post performance of a target behavior may have no impact on that target behavior. In contrast, providing a piece of food to the animal post performance of a target behavior may have an impact on that target behavior by increasing the likelihood of repeat performance. If the performance of the target behavior for that specific stimuli increases, that stimuli is considered a reinforcer. A primary reinforcer is one that does not need learning (or conditioning) to occur to have value. Examples of primary reinforcers include food, control, water, safety. Secondary reinforcers are those that require learning (or conditioning) to occur to imbue those reinforcers with value. Examples include petting (tactile), play, and toys.

Resource guarding: The use of aggression or agonistic behavior to maintain, or gain, access to a resource that has value to the animal.

Social learning: A form of learning from others, via observation, imitation, and modeling. There is good evidence that dogs are capable in some forms of social learning.

Thresholds: A behavior threshold is the point at which behavior changes. There are many thresholds that are commonly referred to relative to dogs, including aggression thresholds, fear thresholds, arousal thresholds, and frustration thresholds. Often trainers and behavior professionals refer to training **'under-threshold'**, which means that through the manipulation of distance, duration, or intensity, animals are kept sub-threshold in order to maximize the impact of the training intervention.

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