

# Doggie Social Hour

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How To Run A Playgroup In Your Shelter



CENTER FOR  
Shelter Dogs

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A PROGRAM OF THE ANIMAL RESCUE LEAGUE OF BOSTON

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## Doggie Social Hour Manual

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This manual is dedicated to Aimee Sadler, who taught and inspired us to provide enrichment for our shelter dogs through playgroups.

# Doggie Social Hour Manual

## Running a playgroup in your shelter

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### Introduction

Doggie Social Hour (also known as a Playgroup) provides dogs with exercise and social interaction with other dogs. Playgroups should occur one to two times daily. It is often most convenient to schedule this session during cage/kennel cleaning time. The benefits of playgroups include:

- Freedom: Off-leash and out of kennel time for dogs is invaluable for burning off energy and reducing stress so dogs are more relaxed during training and when meeting potential adopters.
- Learning: Interaction with their own species can help dogs to gain social skills that may improve their ability to play and interact with other dogs after adoption.
- Improved Cleaning Efficiency: Morning cleaning of kennels is easier when dogs are out in playgroups- less time and staffing is needed for play groups, than for walking dogs individually while kennels are cleaned.
- Better Understanding Of Your Dogs: Time spent in playgroup is time spent observing dogs; knowing more about our dogs allows shelters to do a better job finding the perfect home.
- Fun: Everyone enjoys seeing dogs have so much fun! If the public is watching a dog's personality in playgroup, this can also help enhance adoption.

Doggie Social Hour should:

- Take place in a large yard or room with enough space for each dog to freely run and play with other dogs.
- Include a secure introduction area, preferably an enclosure with double doors or gates, to facilitate safe movement of dogs in and out of the yard and prevent escape.
- Be consistent with your shelter medicine protocols. For example, shelters with moderate to high risk of disease may want to require that their dogs go through a quarantine period before being allowed in playgroups. Shelters with very low disease risk might allow dogs to enter playgroup at any time after they are vaccinated.



# Participants

## People Participants

Every playgroup requires a Leader, an Assistant and at least one Runner.

### **Leader: Supervises Playgroup**

- Makes a list of dogs who will be in the playgroup and the order that they will be introduced to and removed from the group
- Prints the list and distributes copies to the assistant and runners/observers
- Indicates on the list any dogs with special concerns
- Approves participation of playgroup observers
- Has a brief discussion (at beginning of session) with assistant, runners, and observers to discuss introduction of dogs, order of introduction, and behavioral issues
- Wears leader vest which contains all needed tools (see pg 8)
- Carries a leash at all times
- Carries a few treats in pocket (treats are used when attempting to lure or motivate a dog to do something when other techniques are unsuccessful)
- Checks tools to be sure ready for use
- Checks the yard to ensure that all toys have been removed before playgroup starts
- Decides what safety equipment dogs need to wear (muzzles, gentle leaders, leashes, etc.)
- Responsible for supervising the introduction of all new dogs
- Responsible for controlling interactions/deciding when to break up fights between dogs
- Reports on the canine attendees' behavior and provides a summary to staff, which includes a list of dogs in the suggested order of introduction for the next day's leader

## Participants (cont.)

### **Assistant: Assists Playgroup Supervisor**

- Wears assistant apron (which contains all needed tools, see pg 8)
- Carries a leash at all times
- Carries a few treats in pocket (treats are only used when attempting to lure or move dogs to a desired location)
- Responsible for letting dogs in and out of introduction area/gate
- If sees leader moving briskly toward some dogs, joins leader to provide assistance if requested
- When not needed to observe/supervise dog interactions, the assistant is responsible for picking up after the dogs as they defecate

### **Runner: Brings Dogs To and From Yard; Takes instructions from Leader and Assistant**

- Brings dogs from the kennel on a leash, no-pull head collar, or harness if necessary to gate door in the requested order on list
- Carries a treat bag, and ensures that dogs behave appropriately on way to playgroup (dog should sit at doors, etc)
- Brings the dog into the introduction area, when not occupied
- Remove leash, harness or head collar from dog if requested by the leader
- Opens the gate, so that the dog is able to enter the play yard at its own pace, without letting any other dogs into the introduction area
- If Runner enters the play yard, he or she needs to remove the treat bag (this is to avoid conflict amongst dogs over treats)
- After play time walks the dogs back to the kennels.
- Take instructions from Leader and Assistant regarding use of tools and when or which dogs should be removed from playgroup

### **Observer: Makes Observations During Playgroup**

- Observes dogs while they play inside the yard.
- Does not carry treats
- Often an observer is present to learn

# Participants (cont.)

## Dog Participants

- Playgroups can include any dog in the shelter that is:
  - Friendly or behaves neutrally toward other dogs. Dogs that show signs of aggression to other dogs, can be taken on walks instead.
  - Healthy. Dogs with a contagious disease or who have not completed the shelter's initial quarantine period or vaccine protocol, cannot participate in playgroup. Pay careful attention to the health status of dogs transferred from other locations which have a history of higher disease rates.
- Dogs in playgroup should wear martingale style collars. These collars provide a loop for a person to hold onto when necessary. When fitted properly, they also prevent the dog from slipping out of the collar when they are pulling strongly on the leash.
- All dogs should be assigned to a behavior category, which summarizes their behavior toward other dogs in play group. After a dog's first playgroup session, the Leader assigns the dog to a category, which is written after the dog's name on the playgroup list.

### Playgroup Dog Behavior Categories

DF: Dog friendly - good with all dogs

RP: Rough play- dogs that play rough and might overwhelm other dogs

DS: Dog selective- dogs that get along with some but not all dogs

QD: Quiet dog- dogs that like to go outside, but don't play and/or might avoid some other dogs

DA: Dog aggressive- dogs that are aggressive to almost all dogs

PD: Prey drive- dogs that chase small dogs

RG: Resource guarder- dogs that guard toys or sticks in yard (from other dogs)

Prey Drive (PD) and Resource Guarding (RG) are independent of other categories. The same dog can be assigned PD or RG and other categories.

If one dog bites (breaks the skin) or severely threatens (i.e., pins and stands over dog while vocalizing, despite no aggressive or assertive behavior by the victim) another dog, that dog must be excluded from playgroup until approved for re-entry by a supervisor (such as a playgroup leader, shelter manager, or behavior department).

Any aggression (show teeth, lift lip, growl, aggressive bark, snap, bite) toward a person in the play yard results in the dog being excluded from play group until approved for re-entry by a supervisor (such as a playgroup leader, shelter manager, or behavior department).

# General Guidelines

1. A minimum of two people should always be in the yard during play group; two people are necessary to break up a fight if one occurs.
2. Never pet or interact with a dog if another dog is near. When people regularly give dogs attention, conflict between dogs can occur which could lead to a fight.
3. Limit human interactions with dogs as much as possible, other than to quietly praise good behavior (i.e., a shy dog who is finally leaving the gate area and walking toward you, or a dog who had a tense interaction with another dog and chooses to move away). Interaction is only allowed when approved by the playgroup leader.
4. If other dogs are showing intense interest in a fearful dog, it may be acceptable to let the dog 'hide' between your legs to give it a little down time. This should ONLY be done when instructed by the play group leader or assistant. In most situations, protecting the dog will intensify other dogs' interest and put the dog at higher risk.
5. All toys should be removed from the play group area. Dogs should not be allowed to play with toys or sticks with dogs in the play yard during doggie social hour, as toys can be a source of conflict between dogs.
6. Do not intervene in interactions between dogs unless:
  - The leader has asked you to intervene.
  - You've talked to the leader about something you see going on and have received permission to help monitor/manage the situation.
7. Don't let dogs run at the fence line, barking intensely or aggressively at other dogs or people walking by. There is a risk of redirected aggression toward other dogs or people in the yard in these situations.
8. Dogs should enter and exit the play group session in an order which decreases the likelihood of fights. Multiple 'mini' sessions may take place within a single doggie social hour, so that dogs can be separated into compatible groups.

# Doggie Social Hour Safety Tools

- Shake cans\* (can with coins in it, taped closed)
- Small water spray bottles which have been primed and are working\*
- (2) Large air horns\*
- Supply of small, medium, large muzzles (nylon or vinyl basket)
- Small, medium, large, extra large Gentle Leaders
- Leashes (Leader and Assistant should both carry a leash at all times during playgroup)
- Intervention kit: 'Y' pole, catch pole, Kevlar gloves, slip leads with caribeners (for attaching a dog to a fence), ammonia tablets
- (2) Two-way radios (so Leader can communicate with staff indoors, when needed)
- Garden hose connected to water supply, if available
- Vest/Apron, which keeps tools easily accessible. The leader and the assistant should wear a different type of item, so that both the leader and the assistant are easily identifiable by other people participating in a playgroup session.

Leader vest: the leader vest contains one shake can, one spray bottle, and one large air horn

Assistant apron: the assistant apron contains one shake can and one spray bottle.

\*The following tools should only be used to interrupt an interaction that the leader believes may result in injury or significant stress. If used on a frequent basis, this indicates that better planning is needed with regard to the selection of dogs, and the order of introduction and/or removal from the group. Whenever possible dogs should learn (via reprimands from and interaction with) from other dogs. A dog should be excluded from playgroup if frequent use of aversives would be necessary to maintain safety.

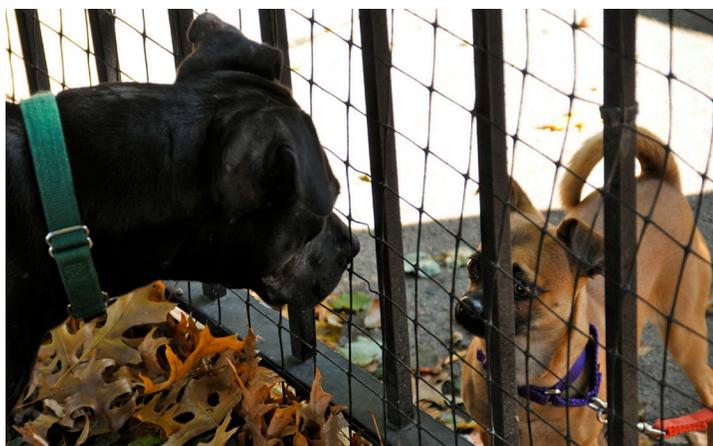
- Spray bottle- spray dog on face  
Advantage: water can be aversive and can be directed toward a single dog  
Disadvantages: dog may not respond, dog may become fearful of the user or playgroup area
- Shake can- shaking can directly at/toward the dog  
Advantage: noise can be aversive, and can be directed toward more than one dog simultaneously  
Disadvantages: dog may not respond, other innocent dogs may also be punished; dogs may become fearful of handler or playgroup area.
- Air horn- a quick 'bop' or longer press of the air horn  
Advantage: Noise can be aversive. Person with air horn does not need to be immediately adjacent to dog. Quick 'bops' of air horn are mildly aversive and can be effective at interrupting the start of an altercation.  
Disadvantages: dog may not respond, affects many dogs in the play yard, dogs may become fearful of handler or playgroup area.

## Introducing A New Dog To Doggie Social Hour

Some dogs can be quickly integrated into playgroup. These dogs include:

- Dogs with a history of friendly behavior toward other dogs on their behavioral history
- Dogs who are calm and quiet

1. Introduce the dog at the beginning of a playgroup session to a known stable and friendly play group dog (Dog 1) who has a play style that is unlikely to provoke an aggressive dog (for example, does not frequently mount or jump on top of other dogs when playing).
2. Take the new dog to the yard first, and let him/her explore for several minutes while dragging a leash. You may wish to leave a no-pull harness or Gentle Leader on the new dog if the dog is large and/or very strong.
3. One person picks up new dog's leash while remaining in the yard, and a second person brings Dog 1 into the gated introduction area. Allow the dogs to interact through the gate.
4. If aggression (from the new dog) occurs at any time, discontinue the introduction. Either choose a different friendly dog for initial introduction, choose a different method of introduction, or designate the new dog as a dog not allowed in playgroup.
5. Pick up Dog 1's leash, and bring Dog 1 into the main play yard, where the new dog is waiting on leash with handler.
6. Stop for at least 5 seconds with the dogs 10 feet away from each other, both on leash, and observe their body language. If signs of aggression are observed, discontinue the introduction.
7. If no aggression is observed, allow the dogs to greet each other, still holding both leashes. Keep leashes loose (slack in line) and do NOT allow the leashes to tangle. Handlers should stay 180 degrees away from each other.
8. If both dogs appear comfortable (no fear, anxiety, or aggression) and friendly, drop Dog 1's leash.
9. If both dogs remain comfortable after Dog 1's leash was dropped, remove Dog 1's leash and then drop the new dog's leash.
10. Additional dogs can be introduced, as long as the new dog remains comfortable and friendly. If not, remove the new dog and repeat introduction in a subsequent session and/or with different dogs.
11. Once the new dog has demonstrated a lack of aggression toward several dogs, the leash may be removed.



## Introducing New Dog to Doggie Social Hour (cont.)

12. If the new dog is medium to large, the dog must also be introduced to a small dog, to evaluate for prey drive before allowing unlimited play group access. Small dog assessment:
  - a. Choose a small dog (less than 20 pounds) that likes to run.
  - b. Start the prey assessment during a regular play group session, preferably when multiple dogs are already out in the yard.
  - c. Place a leash on the new dog before introducing the small dog.
  - d. Allow the small dog into the yard, and observe the new dog's behavior.
  - e. If the new dog is whining, staring intently, and/or lunging at the small dog, the new dog might be inclined to chase, catch, and harm small dogs. Do not continue the introduction at this time. Evaluate the new dog with a small dog in a more controlled setting (with only the new dog and small dog present) and with a basket muzzle or Gentle Leader on the new dog. Allow the new dog to get closer to the small dog.

Depending on what happens, do one of the following:

If the dog's intensity continuously increases (more aggressively lunges) the closer it gets to the small dog, the new dog should not be allowed in play group when small dogs are present. Designate "PD" along with other classification on report.

If the new dog is uninterested or intensity does not increase, allow the dogs to greet each other, first on and then with the new dog's leash dropped. If the new dog is friendly toward, and does not pounce on or intently and continuously chase the small dog, the new dog can be allowed in playgroups with small dogs.

# Introducing a Challenging Dog

Some dogs may benefit from a slow and careful introduction into playgroup. These types of dogs may include:

- Dogs which have been observed to behave aggressively around other dogs solely (and inconsistently) when on walks.
- Dogs which have shown minor and infrequent aggression to other dogs while in the shelter or on the dog's behavioral history
- Very energetic and excited dogs
- Dogs with an unknown history of interaction with other dogs (i.e., strays)

## Prior To Playgroup

Take the new dog for a walk alongside another dog before attempting to introduce the dog to playgroup. If the dog shows friendly behavior toward other dogs while on walks, this is a sign that introducing the dog to play group may be successful. If the dog consistently behaves aggressively when it encounters other dogs outdoors, the dog is likely a poor candidate for playgroup.

Choose a known stable and friendly playgroup dog (Dog 1) with a play style that is unlikely to provoke an aggressive dog (for example, does not frequently mount or jump on top of other dogs when playing), for the new dog's initial playgroup introduction.

## At A Challenging Dog's First Playgroup

1. The introduction should occur at the beginning or end of a playgroup session.
2. Take the new dog to the yard first, and let him/her explore for several minutes while dragging a leash.
3. Put a safety device on the dog, if indicated (see next page). Not all dogs will need a safety device. Using these safety devices occasionally has the added benefit of inhibiting outgoing and aggressive behavior, which can facilitate a smooth introduction.
4. Pick up new dog's leash, and bring Dog 1 into the gated introduction area. Allow the dogs to interact through the gate.
5. If aggression (from the new dog) occurs at any time, discontinue the introduction. Either choose a different Dog 1 for initial introduction, or designate the new dog as a dog not allowed in playgroup.
6. Pick up Dog 1's leash, and bring Dog 1 into the main play yard, where the new dog is waiting on leash with a handler.
7. Stop for at least 5 seconds with the dogs 10 feet away from each other and observe their body language. If signs of aggression are observed, discontinue the introduction.
8. If no aggression is observed, allow the dogs to greet each other, still holding both leashes (leash is attached to the new dog's gentle leader or collar, if the dog is not wearing a Gentle Leader (GL)).
9. Keep leashes loose (slack in line) and do NOT allow the leashes to tangle. Handlers should stay 180 degrees away from each other.

## Introducing a Challenging Dog (cont.)

10. If both dogs appear comfortable (no fear, anxiety, or aggression) and friendly, drop and/or remove Dog 1's leash.
11. Next steps include (progression may vary, depending upon the individual dog and the safety device(s) used):
  - a. Drop the new dog's leash
  - b. Remove basket muzzle
  - c. Loosen GL so that it fits normally and appropriately (see below)
  - d. Remove GL
  - e. Remove leash
12. A second dog can be introduced if the new dog is comfortable and friendly. If not, remove the new dog and repeat introduction in a subsequent session.
13. The new dog must also be introduced to a small dog, to evaluate for prey drive before allowing unlimited play group access. Use muzzle and/or GL if necessary in this introduction, as you did with the initial introduction.

### Safety Devices

**Muzzle (basket muzzle, or loose fitting nylon muzzle):** Use if the dog is large and difficult to control with unknown history, or if dog has a history of aggression. Avoid using a basket muzzle or loose fitting nylon muzzle during warm or humid weather. The dog cannot pant as easily as it can without the muzzle; this can result in heat stroke and/or death.

**Gentle Leader (GL):** The Gentle Leader may be fitted so that it has a tight fit around the nose, which inhibits the dog's ability to severely damage the other dog. Fitting the GL in this way will NOT prevent bites (and should never be recommended to the public for use as a muzzle). Do not ever fit the GL tightly around the nose of a dog, even for one minute, during warm or humid weather. This can result in heat stroke and/or death.

**GL and muzzle:** Place the GL on first, and the muzzle over the GL. Use both safety tools when you are certain you are going to need to do a slow introduction, as in step 11 above. The muzzle is removed once you know that it is NOT likely that the new dog will attack the friendly dog, but still need additional control and management of the new dog.

If the dog is pawing repeatedly at the device, use a different device or discontinue the introduction and work on desensitizing the dog to the device, at a different time before attempting reintroduction.

# Intervention: Reducing Tension Between Dogs

With multiple dogs who don't know each other in a playgroup, conflict may arise.

When tension occurs, do NOT act immediately. Allow the dogs to work things out on their own whenever possible.

Options for intervening during tense interactions include:

- Pick up Leash- If dog has a leash on, person picks up the leash to remove the dog from the interaction or steps on the leash so the other dog can move away.
- Body blocking- person stands in front of fearful/avoiding dog and prevents instigator from approaching
- Drawing attention away- one or several play group people solicit all the dogs to follow them and play- via friendly voice and running in the opposite direction 'hey dogs, lets play!!'
- Voice- ONLY use voice if you can remain calm (only use a steady, low-pitched tone) - dogs will sense anxiety in your voice if you are not calm, which might increase their anxiety. To interrupt a tense altercation, say the dog's name or 'enough' to direct attention away from the other dog and toward you. Never yell or scream.

Intervention techniques that are recommended for specific circumstances include:

- A dog chasing another dog or standing on top of another dog continuously, despite the other dog giving body language signals that it does not wish to interact (fear, avoidance, submission): body blocking, voice, pick up leash, aversive tool (spray bottle, shake can, or quick bop of air horn)
- Two dogs with stiff body posture directly staring at one another: voice, pick up leash, aversive tool
- A dog attempts to interact with a fearful dog that is squealing or yelping: voice, pick up leash, aversive tool (spray bottle is preferred)
- A dog attempts to interact with a very fearful dog that does not wish to interact: body blocking, voice, pick up leash, aversive tool (spray bottle is preferred)
- Multiple dogs heading toward the introduction gate when another dog is entering, or multiple dogs heading toward an altercation: draw attention away

## When A Fight Occurs:

1. Leader and Assistant **walk** toward the fighting dogs, while the leader activates the air horn.
2. Run ONLY if it is obvious that one of the dogs is being severely injured.
3. DO NOT yell/scream at, or hit the dogs.
4. If the dogs have not separated by the time the Leader and Assistant reach them, press the air horn again.
5. If at any point during the fight the dogs separate from each other, the leader should grab one dog's collar (or leash, if present) and the assistant grabs the other and DOES NOT LET GO (unless the dog attempts to redirect aggression onto the handler).
6. Leader and Assistant move the dogs away from each other, and attach the dogs' leashes as quickly as possible.
7. If the dogs are still fighting, follow the instructions for "Breaking Up A Fight" (next page) .

# Breaking Up A Fight

It is important to differentiate a fight from an altercation. Altercations may involve growling, barking and aggressive posturing, but the dogs do not harm each other; oftentimes these do not require intervention. A fight involves the dogs grabbing each other's skin or body parts with the intent to cause injury. Remember that prevention is always best. Careful selection of the order of introduction and removal of dogs from playgroup should be done in an effort to prevent fights from occurring.

**Breaking up a fight is dangerous. DO NOT ever attempt to pull a dog off of or away from the other dog when one of the dogs is 'attached' (biting and not letting go) to the other.**

Grabbing the dog's collar puts you at risk of getting bitten, and attempting to pull the dog off after biting another dog while the dog continues to hold on, almost always worsens damage, by creating lacerations or tearing (as opposed to punctures). When in doubt, your safety is MOST important; do not put yourself at risk by touching the dogs.

When a fight occurs during playgroup, first try using an air horn to separate the dogs. (See Intervention: Reducing Tension Between Dogs)

## **Level Two: Breaking up a fight when an air horn doesn't work**

1. If the air horn doesn't separate the dogs, REMAIN CALM!
2. The Leader picks up the back legs of one of the dogs and the Assistant picks up the back legs of the other dog.
3. As soon as one dog releases its hold, both handlers back away from each other (while still holding their legs), while circling. The purpose of circling is to cause the dogs to 'sidestep' (cross their front legs while walking), which will make it more difficult for them to redirect on to you and bite you.
4. Continue to back the dogs away from each other until one dog is in the introduction area.

## **Level Three: Breaking up a fight when level two doesn't work**

If the dogs do not release their hold after their hind legs are picked up, try the following:

1. Put on kevlar gloves
2. Spray with water from hose
3. Use "Y" pole, to pin dog to ground

# Keeping Track of a Dog's Behavior

- After conducting doggie social hour (playgroup), the leader should provide a summary of the session, including the order in which dogs entered and were removed from the yard and any behavior notes.
- Important behavioral observations (i.e., introduction to play group or any altercations) should also be recorded in the dog's shelter record
- Any changes to the dog's play category should be noted for the next playgroup.

## Sample of a daily Doggie Social Hour summary:

Date xx/xx/xxxx			
Leader	Marianne	Runners	Caitie & Leigh
Asst	Alana		
Dog Name	Play Category	Instructions	Notes
Chester	DF		
Max	DS		
Ace	DF		
Shadow	GD		
Munchkin	GD		
Smokey	GD	<b>Intro back to group today</b>	snapped at a couple dogs that got too much in his face - especially Ace
Oskar	GD	<b>intro to group</b>	good with intro - but lifted his lip & growled a few times when too many dogs got near him at once
Joey			I noticed a difference when she was alone - she did not hide in the corner and she did not snap at any dogs. Once other rat terriers came out she returned to the corner and snapped at Chester when he tried to play.
Penny	GD		
Peter (male black collar)			
		<b>Ace out</b>	
Tyrone	GD		
Frankie (female black collar)			
		<b>Tyrone, Rat Pack, Max, Chester out</b>	
Connor	RP - RG		
		<b>Everyone out except Connor</b>	
Sharyn			