



Playgroups: Getting Started

What is a Playgroup?

A playgroup allows multiple dogs to spend off-leash time with other dogs in a secured area, monitored by trained handlers and often outdoors. This acts as an enrichment activity and allows personnel to collect better information for pet placement and pathway planning, give dogs a break from the kennel environment, and increase healthy mental and physical stimulation. Utilizing playgroups may reduce kennel stress and frustration, improving the overall mental health of the dogs and staff and volunteer handling safety. This practice allows shelters to monitor dogs in an environment that may help differentiate between behaviors such as [on-leash reactivity](#), barrier reactivity, and dog aggression. Observing the dogs in multiple environments and improving behavior consideration notes may reduce the number of dogs thought to be dog-aggressive or requiring single-dog homes. Playgroups may also:

- Provide support for fearful or undersocialized dogs
- Help create specialized behavior modification plans
- Improve individual pet profile details
- Decrease length of stay
- Increase live outcomes
- Save personnel time if combined with cleaning schedules

Playgroup Terminology

Dog behavior and playgroup terminology can be very technical. Understanding appropriate terms ensures effective communication occurs and the safety and success of playgroups. Review the following support documents to get started and identify which type of playgroup programming works best for your organization.

- [Inter-Dog Playgroup Guidelines \(Page 62\) - Shelter Playgroup Alliance](#)
- [Playgroup Terms & Definitions - Dogs Playing For Life \(DPFL\)](#)
- [CCAS Playgroup Terms and Definitions \(DPFL-focused\)](#)
- [Playgroup Glossary | Pet Rescue Resource](#)

How Organizations Can Begin

Note: *Laws and ordinances that govern stray hold and placement policies as well as available space and resources may impact the playgroup process. This document aims to provide support resources that can be customized to fit your organization's unique needs.*

Selecting Dogs for Playgroups

Initial playgroup dog selections can be made based on a variety of categories including temperament, play styles, spay/neuter status, sex, and more. Start small and follow safe



introduction protocols to identify potential pairings. Consult veterinary and operations teams to identify medical considerations that may impact eligibility. Some dogs may not enjoy playgroups, and that's okay! Other enrichment opportunities can be provided to them.

- [Assessing Dogs for Playgroups - The Pet Rescue Resource](#)
- [Dog Introduction Methods - The Pet Rescue Resource](#)
 - [Dog Selection SOP - The Pet Rescue Resource](#)
 - [Dog Introduction and Dropping Leashes - Shelter Playgroup Alliance](#)
- [Playgroup Behavior Overview - HASS](#)
- [Dog-Dog Introductions - KC Pet Project](#) - Note: Primary audience is adopter introductions

Playgroup Space and Set Up

Playgroup should occur in an enclosed space (indoors or outdoors) with enough room for multiple dogs to play and personnel to safely interact or intervene when appropriate. Having a greeting barrier and easy-to-access space to separate a dog if a fight should occur is ideal. If the organization has a playgroup space outdoors, consider installing an overhead shade and small plastic pools for the hot summer months. For colder locations, heating solutions and de-icing can extend year-round playgroup possibilities. Organizations with limited resources may flex regular dog walking spaces into playgroup-safe areas on an alternating schedule.

- [Setting Up the Play Space - Pet Rescue Resource](#)
- [Play Yard Recommendations - Dogs Playing for Life](#)
- [Playgroup Weather Considerations - Dogs Playing for Life](#)

Supplies

Supplies may vary by the type of playgroup programming the organization is implementing. Some common supplies that can be kept in secure containers in the play yards may include:

- Water bowls
- Collars, drag leashes, and/or harnesses
- Toys or equipment for activities
- Treats and treat pouch
- Personnel radios
- [Safety kit in case of a fight](#)
- Muzzles
- Aversives (spray bottle, shake can, air horn, etc.)



Training

In addition to understanding the basic terminology, training for staff and volunteers is critical to creating a safe and effective playgroup program. Training may vary by your organization's specific setup and playgroup selections. The following resources can help get you started.

- [Playgroup Video Library - Dogs Playing for Life](#)
- [Learning Library - Dogs Playing for Life](#)
- [Playgroup Manual - Dogs Playing for Life](#)
- [Basics: Facilitating Safe and Healthy Dog Play in Shelters - Shelter Playgroup Alliance](#)
- [Inter-Dog Playgroup Guidelines - Shelter Playgroup Alliance](#)
- [Learn with Us - Shelter Playgroup Alliance](#)
- [Sample Protocols - Pet Resource Center](#)

Personnel

The number of people and scope of work to facilitate a playgroup may vary on shelter population, training, facility, and resources. These positions may be managed by [volunteers](#) or staff.

- Samples: Playgroup Monitor/Facilitators
 - [Austin Pets Alive!: PG Handler Job Description](#)
 - [DPFL: Canine Enrichment Coordinator Job Description](#)
- Samples: Playgroup Runners
 - [Austin Pets Alive!: PG Runner Overview](#)
 - [DPFL: Runner Instruction](#)
- [Roles and Responsibilities - Pet Resource Center](#)
- [Gaining Playgroup Buy-In - Pet Resource Center](#)

Data Tracking

Playgroups can be utilized to discover a significant amount of information about an individual dog. Record relevant information in existing shelter software or a centralized database for information about pets in care that is accessible by anyone managing care and placement pathways. This information can be used internally to improve adoption and foster placement options, arrange transfers to external partners, or improve in-shelter care plans.

- Dog-Level Information
 - Sociability with other dogs
 - Play style
 - Housetraining
 - Other bathroom habits (won't eliminate on leash, only eliminates on grass, etc.)
 - Comfort around new people
 - Comfort being leashed



- Leash manners
 - Comfort being guided by a collar
 - Response to handler interruptions
 - Interest in playing with water
 - Tolerance of various weather conditions
 - Medical condition status (diarrhea, sneezing, etc.)
 - Energy level and trends
- Shelter Software Examples
 - [Shelterluv: PG Tracking](#)
 - [PetPoint: PG Tracking](#)
 - Chameleon PG Tracking:

Data Point	Fields	How to Track
Frequency of playgroups provided and behavior observation notes related to each	Animal Evaluation Window	Window > Animal Evaluation > Eval Type > Review Date > Tests > Test Results > Notes > Score

- Playgroup Tracking Templates
 - [Playgroup Notes Sample - Dogs Playing for Life](#)
 - [See Page 44 of Guidelines - Shelter Playgroup Alliance](#)
 - [Playgroups Notes Sheet - Pet Rescue Resource](#)

What Does Success Look Like?

Note: Success may look different at each unique sheltering facility. Maximizing available resources and collaborating with other teams is key to creating a sustainable program.

- **Staff or volunteers** are trained to run playgroups properly and have dedicated assigned time to manage playgroup activities daily. This may include a playgroup lead, backup leads, and runners.
- **Playgroup notes** are utilized to improve future placement opportunities and identify any concerns. Medical concerns are triaged accordingly and behavior considerations are integrated into the pet's individual care plan.
- All dogs in care **receive a playgroup eligibility determination within 48 hours of arrival** or stray hold. All eligible dogs participate in playgroups regularly.
- Playgroup activities are **integrated into the overall facility schedule**. This includes coordination with the medical teams for care, cleaning schedules, enrichment, and placement pick-ups.