Canine Playgroups

Current Best Practices

Published September 2025

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Introduction

Off-leash dog playgroups (PGs) can be an efficient, productive, and rewarding means of meeting the physical and psychological needs of shelter dogs. Playgroups allow shelter dogs to socialize with other dogs and people while exercising, exploring off leash, and engaging in other species-typical behaviors. There is evidence that PGs can reduce stress — with dogs jumping and pacing less often and barking less while kenneled after PG (Johnson, et. al., 2013). Playgroups are also a valuable tool for learning about a dog's current behavior and for modifying problem behavior (McConnell and London, 2009).

Dogs are individuals, and some thrive in large, active PGs while others are happier in small, calm groups or even with specific play partners. Some dogs are not appropriate for PGs due to their aggressive behavior or unrelenting arousal coupled with a lack of social behavior, which creates an unsafe or unpleasant experience for other dogs. Some dogs are too frightened to benefit from PGs. Shelter staff are responsible for monitoring PGs to ensure each dog is benefiting from the experience.

The ideal composition and structure of a PG largely depend on the session's goal. This document provides guidance to help structure basic PG sessions that are designed to provide enrichment for dog-friendly dogs in our care. Everyone should understand these basic parameters before running a PG. Later in this document, there are other recommendations for PGs with alternative goals (e.g., puppy socialization, assessment, and behavior modification).

Preparation & Safety Tips

Handler Roles

Handlers are individuals who will interact with dogs for the purpose of the PG, including moving dogs between the kennels and the yard and monitoring the PG. Some general guidelines for all playgroups:

- Handlers should stand and be ready at all times to interrupt dog interactions, though it may be appropriate to kneel or sit when fearful dogs are present in the yard, with the Lead handler's approval (see below for assigned roles).
- Handlers may interact when dogs approach and solicit attention, but if the dogs are newer/unknown, keep interactions brief and move away if multiple dogs approach at the same time.
- Handlers must review how to and be comfortable with breaking up a dog fight prior to participating in a playgroup. This is especially important for the PG Lead handler.

Assigned Handler Roles

Lead:

- Selects dogs for Runners to bring to or remove from the yard
- Decides when to add/remove dogs to/from the PG
- Uses tools and other interventions as needed
- Remains in the yard at all times. Does not leave until all dogs have cleared the play yard.

- Assistant(s) (as needed):
  - Follows the Lead's directions
  - In case of a fight, immediately alerts other staff for help and then helps the Lead to break up the fight
- Runners:
  - Bring dogs to and from the yard, as directed by the Lead
  - In case of a dog fight, they immediately confine the dog they are handling (in a safe space) and then confine any dogs in the yard that they are comfortable handling

Play Yard Setup

Location

- Outdoor yards are preferred. The outdoor environment has naturally occurring distractions to help prevent dogs from becoming hyper-focused on one another. Dogs also benefit from the stimulation of outdoor sights, sounds, and smells.
- Ideally, the yard should be in a quiet area so handlers can hear dog vocalizations and dogs can easily hear sound-based safety equipment. When possible, avoid setting up yards near high-traffic or excessively loud areas.

Play Yard Size

- Smaller yards (approximately 20 feet x 25 feet) are easier to monitor and allow handlers quickly to reach dogs to break up altercations.
- Larger yards (approximately 45 feet x 50 feet) may promote more independent play and less forced proximity between dogs. However, larger yards also enable dogs to gain more speed as they run, which can be problematic with dogs who display a play style that involves body-slamming or hip-checking. Also, it may take more time for a handler to get near enough to interrupt tense interactions or break up a fight. Large yards can be divided in half with kennel panels, gates, or other equipment for more versatility.

Floor Surface

- Should be non-slip
- Should be easily cleaned
- Must not get too hot
- Should absorb shock

Play Yard Setup

- Yard Airlock Entrance (Figure 1 & Figure 2)

  An airlock (aka confinement space or stash pen), created by an exterior door opening into a confined space leading to a door into the play yard, is critical to prevent dogs in the yard from escaping as new dogs enter the play yard. It also allows the handler to remove the leash from a new dog before they enter the yard.
- Whenever possible, the yard should have multiple airlocks spaced around the perimeter to increase the efficiency and safety of PGs. This enables Leads to: (1) have dogs ready to integrate into the yard, (2) quickly change the group dynamics by temporarily adding and removing dogs, based on their playstyle, and (3) quickly remove dogs from the PG should an aggressive event occur.
- Gate latches should be sturdy and easily opened with one hand.
- Ideally, gates and doors should swing in both directions.
- If there are multiple connected yards, each yard should have an external entrance to avoid walking dogs through another PG to exit.
- Sunshades in outdoor yards should be secure.
- Dogs should have access to water, available in multiple bowls or pools. Pools are preferred to reduce the risk of resource guarding and allow dogs to cool themselves (Figure 3).
- Large, non-porous obstacles (Figures 4-8) are ideal for dividing the yard's space. These may slow down the pace of play and provide a refuge for dogs needing a break.

Safety Equipment & Supplies

Recommended safety equipment and supplies are listed below and should always be available when dogs are present in the yard. This includes:

- At least one safety bucket in small yards and 2-3 safety buckets in larger yards. Safety buckets include (Figure 9):
  - Water spray bottle
  - Pet Corrector (compressed air)
  - Small shake can
  - Monster shake can
  - Air horn

    - Spray Shield (citronella)
    - Seat belt cutter
    - Break stick
- Hog board(s), round winter sleds, or other easy-to-hold items used to break visual contact and move a dog safely into a space without touching the dog (Figure 10)
- Drag lines (e.g., 6' lightweight leash without handle/loop on the end or 6'-8' BioThane® leash without handle/loop on the end, attached to a dog's collar or harness) (Figure 11)
- Basket muzzles (Figure 12) are recommended because they are best for extended use, and dogs can pant normally, drink water, and eat treats while wearing one. Soft or "sleeve" muzzles should not be used because they limit panting and drinking and are best for brief use (e.g., nail trims).

Generally, safety equipment is used to interrupt inappropriate or unsafe behavior. To apply effectively, tools must be activated quickly and at an intensity that stops the behavior, but not so intensely that the dogs become frightened and stop interacting altogether. If used at too low of an intensity to change the dog's behavior, the dog may habituate to the tool, and it will become ineffective, even at a stronger intensity. Using safety equipment too frequently or at too high an intensity can also create negative associations with other dogs, the yard, or handlers.

Treats, treat pouches, and toys **should not be present** in the yard. Exceptions may be made for fearful dogs – see fearful dog section.

Safety Tips for Integrating New Dog(s) into a Playgroup

- The Runner brings their dog into the airlock and closes gates.
- The Runner removes the leash and places a drag line if requested and then exits the airlock. They should not enter the yard.
- The Lead briefly assesses the behavior of the dogs at the airlock gate as they acknowledge the other dogs in the yard.
- The Lead will open the gate to let the dog into the yard when other dogs are not gathered nearby, to reduce the likelihood of social conflict in a tight space.
    - The Lead may create a "bubble" of space for the new dog to enter by: (1) using their body or a physical barrier to block the other dogs from mobbing the new dog, (2) using a squirt of water to keep other dogs at bay, (3) opening the gate latch and holding the gate closed until the yard dogs lose interest and move away on their own, or (4) opening the gate after the other dogs have been called away from the gate by the Assistant.
- The dog should enter off leash or drag a long line (without the handler holding the line).

- Safety equipment should be held in the Lead's hands when a new dog enters the yard. All handlers should be aware of the risk of over-reliance on safety equipment (e.g., water bottles or shake cans) to interrupt dog-dog interactions. Allowing dogs to negotiate interactions without interruption, even tense ones, can be an important skill dogs can learn and maintain in PGs.
- If the Lead has concerns about the behavior of the new dog, before they let the dog enter the yard:
    - The Lead should hold a shake can in their hand and direct the Assistant to hold an air horn in their hand to be used only in case of a fight.
    - The Lead may choose to temporarily reduce the number of dogs in the yard by stashing them in airlocks.

Basic Playgroups

Basic PGs provide an enriching social and physical experience for dogs who enjoy socializing with other dogs. Not all dogs will actively engage in play, but if they enjoy exploring and milling about the yard in the presence of other dogs, they are likely good candidates for basic PGs.

Basic PG eligibility is determined by shelter behavior staff or other staff as assigned, based on their observations of each dog's behavior in PG. Dogs in basic PGs must have already shown sufficient dog-dog skills to require minimal management. Basic PGs may be run by approved non-behavior staff or volunteers.

Playgroup handlers should report any concerning behavior to the behavior staff or other staff as assigned. Dogs who show signs of stress, fear, or behavior that requires consistent handler intervention without improvement may be better suited to a different type of PG.

Alternative Playgroup Types

The following sections outline PGs with specific behavior goals beyond enrichment, including Puppy Socialization Playgroups, Behavior Assessment Playgroups, and Behavior Modification Playgroups.

Generally, for more specialized PGs, there should be:

- A higher ratio of handlers to dogs
- Smaller groups or pairs (try to avoid trios)
- More experienced handlers in the yard to manage the group(s)
    - This allows the Lead to focus their full attention on the behavior of the dogs and make decisions on whether the PG should continue.
- A second handler is always present in the yard with the Lead

- This person should be ready with safety equipment if a fight ensues, or to help in other ways at the direction of the Lead.

Other modifications from the basic-style PGs include:

- Having multiple muzzles available for use when necessary
- Ensuring there are never more dogs in the PG than airlocks in the yard to allow for individual separation of dogs when necessary

Helper Dogs

A helper dog's presence can help another dog by socially facilitating desirable behavior. Helper dogs are resilient, affiliative, and tolerant around other dogs. Their social skills allow them to quickly read and respond to other dogs' communications, including diffusing tense interactions. They won't overwhelm a fearful or avoidant dog and/or will tolerate or appropriately correct pushy or otherwise inappropriate behavior.

Helper dogs are dogs who have shown the skills to be able to:

- Solicit interaction from other dogs appropriately and adjust their own behavior in response to other dogs
- Accept interaction from humans willingly
- Insert breaks or slow down the play without handler assistance
- Give appropriate corrections to other dogs
- Respond to other dogs' corrections proportionately
- Tolerate less-skilled dogs' play
- Show resilience to handler intervention and safety-equipment use
- Tolerate mildly threatening behavior from other dogs without responding aggressively

Helper dogs' welfare must be carefully protected. Be attentive to their emotional state and body language during and after PGs. Any changes in behavior or resiliency in response to other dogs and/or safety equipment use should be addressed promptly. Repeated (and sometimes even single) exposure to aggressive dogs can cause long-term or irreversible damage to helper dogs, as can repeated exposure to the handler's use of safety equipment.

Welfare Tips

- Rotate helper dogs to give them recovery time and to avoid declines in the helper dog's sociability with other dogs.
- Helper dogs should regularly be provided with low-pressure play sessions with dogs they enjoy interacting with (e.g., basic PGs).

- If a helper dog has a bad experience (but is not injured) or experiences repeated aggression from other dogs during PG sessions, allow them a short break if needed and then arrange for a “recovery play session” with other social dog(s) that will enable low-pressure interaction.
- Decide the timing of recovery play sessions based on the individual dog and the type of incident. Some may be able to move right into a play session with another social dog, while others may need time to decompress.
- If increasing sensitivity to the use of safety equipment during a PG is observed, arrange play sessions with dogs where no safety equipment is used, enabling a recovery play session with people as well.

Certain dogs may be considered helpers depending on the dog(s) they are paired with. For example, a calm dog might be a great helper with fearful dogs but not with exuberant dogs showing inappropriate, high-energy play.

Puppy Socialization Playgroups

In addition to the enrichment benefit, PGs are part of a robust shelter puppy socialization program. Effective puppy socialization PGs rely on an integrated-care approach and require frequent, cooperative communication between medical and behavior teams because puppies may not have finished their vaccine series. This collaboration ensures individual puppies are provided with PG socialization opportunities within their primary socialization period, especially if puppies are not co-housed with their littermates and/or their mother. Generally, puppies eight weeks of age or older should be eligible to play with healthy dogs and puppies from the general shelter population.

Puppy socialization PGs can be conducted with puppies only or with puppies and adults. However, puppy-only groups may result in repeated practice of inappropriate behavior. The best approach is likely to include a mix of puppies and adult dogs in a PG.

If individual puppies consistently aggress toward littermates in PG, try playing them with similarly aged or older non-littermate puppies to determine if their behavior improves. If the aggression is egregious or the puppy continues to aggress despite the changes to the group composition, the puppy may need a different PG that is designed to assess and/or modify behavior. Some puppies may be best suited for adult-dog-only PGs.

Personnel

Assistant(s) handle logistical details, such as providing Runners with kennel locations for PG dogs, retrieving equipment as needed, helping with loading and unloading crated dogs, etc.

It may be helpful to have someone serve as videographer and/or notetaker during PGs, especially when multiple puppies are included in puppy socialization PGs.

Safety Equipment

When first introducing an adult dog to puppies, be sure to observe their response to the puppies from behind a barrier or place a dragline on the adult to mitigate the potential damage a large adult dog could inflict on a small puppy.

Group Size

Ideally, begin with a small group of puppies or adult helper dogs (e.g., initially only two puppies and one helper dog) and add puppies and adult helper dogs one or two at a time while continuously monitoring the behavior of all PG participants.

Maintain an approximate 2:1 ratio of puppies to adult dogs. This creates a balance of adult-puppy social learning opportunities while avoiding potential problems that can result from free play between puppies.

Helper Dogs

The role of the adult helper dog is to teach puppies proper social behavior by fairly correcting inappropriate behavior and encouraging proper social interactions.

Ideal adult dogs are those who:

- Enjoy socializing with puppies
- Appropriately correct rude puppy behavior

Potential adult dogs are those who:

- Merely tolerate puppies (these adults shouldn't routinely serve in this role if they don't enjoy it)
- Are overly tolerant of rude puppy behavior and unwilling to correct them (they should not be the only adult dog present)

Adult dogs who should ***not*** participate are those who:

- Correct puppies unnecessarily or overreact to their behavior

Behavior Assessment Playgroups

Information about a dog's sociability with other dogs may be gathered in a PG context. Playgroup-based assessments enable handlers to efficiently learn about the dog's behavior toward a variety of dogs of both sexes, varying breed types, body size, and play styles. It is recommended that initial assessments of dog sociability occur in a PG setting when dogs have a history of being socialized with other dogs without evidence of previous dog-dog aggressive behavior.

The two types of assessment PGs outlined below are:

- Playgroup-Based Assessment of Dog Sociability
- Additional Information Gathering After an On-Leash Dog-Dog Evaluation

These assessments can be done: (1) as a substitute for an on-leash dog-dog behavior assessment or (2) to gather more information when an on-leash dog-dog assessment yields inconclusive results. In both scenarios, the PG should be more deliberately arranged and managed to ensure safety.

Playgroup-based Assessment of Dog Sociability

A PG-based assessment may be conducted in lieu of on-leash introductions to learn about the dog's sociability with other dogs. Typically, this approach is selected when there is reason to believe there is a low likelihood of aggression or when it is suspected that the leash is causing the dog to be defensive. This assessment is for dogs whose sociability is unknown or inconclusive due to a variety of reasons, including:

- Dogs who may be too fearful to walk on leash
- Dogs who are fearful of humans (and who may benefit from the option to interact with dogs at a distance from human handlers)
- Dogs who show conflicted dog-dog behavior on leash (with no history of offensive aggression toward other dogs)

Behavior management and/or staff should decide whether an individual dog is a good candidate for PG-based assessment of dog-dog sociability.

If there is concern that the dog being assessed will be overwhelmed by the presence of multiple dogs, allow that dog to enter the yard first to investigate the environment, greet the handlers, and greet the helper dogs in the airlocks. Then, release the helper dogs one at a time, continuously monitoring the comfort level of the dog being assessed.

Personnel

- The Lead must give their full attention to the dogs in the yard.
- Assistant(s) handle logistical details, such as providing Runners with kennel locations for PG dogs, retrieving equipment as needed, helping with loading and unloading crated dogs, etc.
- Other people should record videos or take notes during the PG.
    - If multiple dogs are being assessed at the same time, a videographer may be present to record the PG for future reference.
    - It may also be helpful to have someone take notes about the behavior of the dog whose sociability is being assessed.

Safety Equipment

- Draglines may be attached to certain dogs (at the handler's discretion) if they display fearful behavior and may be difficult to collect, or if the dog's behavior during an airlock gate greeting is tense.
- Muzzles should be within reach in the yard; in case they are needed.
- Crates (preferably on wheels) can be used to move fearful dogs to the yard if they cannot walk on a leash.
    - Though being removed from a crate can be stressful, this should be weighed against the potential for these dogs to experience reduced stress and fear when allowed to freely interact with other dogs, away from people.

Group Size

Ideally, begin with a small group of helper dogs (2-4) and add dogs who are being assessed to the PG one at a time, with a total of up to 6-10 dogs, provided the proper number of handlers to dogs can be maintained as group size increases.

Helper Dogs

- Should be resilient and dog social
- Have a proven history of tolerating or giving appropriate corrections to dogs engaged in inappropriate behavior
- Are similar in size to the dog being assessed
- Can be selected from within the population of dogs being assessed if existing helper dogs are not available or quarantine prevents intermingling of populations

Additional Information Gathering After an On-Leash Dog-Dog Evaluation

There are times when on-leash dog-dog assessments don't supply sufficient information about the dog's social behavior. Some examples of dogs who need further testing include:

- Dogs who were not overtly dog social or dog aggressive but still showed behaviors of concern during the on-leash dog-dog assessment or had a history of concerning behavior (e.g., dog aggression noted in a behavior history or dog was tense and/or pushy but not overtly aggressive with a helper dog)
- Dogs who displayed aggression during the dog-dog assessment, either from across a barrier (e.g., fence or gate) or while on leash, and the handlers suspect that the barrier or tight leash may have caused the dog to feel defensively aggressive.

Proceeding with Off-Leash Introduction Using Caution

The most conservative approach should be used for gathering information after an on-leash dog-dog assessment when further assessing dogs from suspected dogfighting cases. These are dogs who displayed behavior(s) of concern but were not clearly unsafe for placement. To proceed:

- The dog being assessed should first greet helper dogs through a fence or gate before being admitted to the yard.
    - For dog-fighting dogs, end the interaction if overt aggression is observed during this greeting.
    - For all other dogs, if the observed aggressive behavior is suspected to be worsened by the fence or gate, the dog may be admitted to PG at the discretion of the Lead.
- If no behaviors of concern are observed, the dog may be allowed to enter the yard.

Leads may choose a less conservative approach for dogs they believe pose less risk of causing significant damage to other dogs.

Personnel

- Leads and Assistants should focus their full attention on the dogs in the yard.
- Runners should display increased environmental awareness when moving dogs to and from these PGs because of the unknown behavior of the dogs they are handling.
- Other people may serve in a logistics, videography, and/or notetaking role.
    - These individuals handle logistical details, such as providing Runners with kennel locations of dogs they are moving to and from the yard, retrieving muzzles and draglines, helping with loading and unloading crated dogs, etc.

Safety Equipment

- Dogs being assessed (helper dogs at the discretion of the Lead) should have a dragline attached so they can be easily removed from the yard.
    - In some cases (e.g., assessment is conducted without muzzles), handlers may choose to walk into the yard with the dog, holding the dragline lightly, so they can respond quickly if the dog displays unsafe behavior.
    - Handlers should drop the dragline if the dog does not immediately aggress or display other behaviors commonly preceding a fight (e.g., prolonged stillness while hovering their chin over the withers of another dog).
        - If the handler is not holding the dragline when concerning behaviors occur, they should approach stealthily so as not to trigger the dogs to react and grab the dragline with no tension. Then you can immediately remove the dog if they begin to aggress.

- If a dog appears tense but does not aggress, or if they are highly aroused, it is recommended that they be securely muzzled with a basket muzzle.
- At minimum, one handler in the yard should be trained on the use of a break stick.
- It is critical that the Lead checks in with all the handlers before any dog being assessed is released into the yard to ensure all are prepared to swiftly intervene as needed.

Group Size

- Can be pairs or small groups (i.e., up to 4 dogs).

Helper Dogs

- Are the same or similar size to the dog being assessed
- Are not overly sensitive to handler intervention and use of safety equipment
- Ideally, both male and female helper dogs can be available to gather information about a dog's response to both sexes.
    - Aggression is less likely between dogs of opposite sex. If a dog aggresses toward the opposite-sexed dog, it makes sense to skip the same-sex interaction.
    - Some dogs do best when interacting with only one helper dog at first. Other dogs may prefer a PG with two to three other dogs as it may reduce the social pressure to interact.
- Handlers should avoid overuse of any one individual helper dog.

Behavior Modification Playgroups

Playgroups may be aimed at modifying a puppy or adult dog's social behavior with other dogs and/or people. The goals of behavior modification PGs can be: (1) modifying dog-directed behavior (i.e., teaching a dog how to engage appropriately with other dogs) or (2) modifying fear of people.

Modifying Dog-Dog Behavior

Behaviors that may be addressed in a behavior modification PG include, but are not limited to:

- Body slamming or hip checking another dog
- Mounting
- Hard mouthing
- Unwanted chasing without pausing
- Lack of appropriate response to other dogs' social cues
- Escalating arousal, including the inability to take self-directed play breaks

Personnel

- Should have one Lead, at least one Assistant, and one Runner per dog in the PG.
- It may be helpful to have someone serve as a videographer and/or notetaker recording the behavior of the dog being assessed during PG.

Safety Equipment

- A dragline on the dog being assessed is important because it allows handlers to control the dog's movement without direct physical contact.
- A basket muzzle may also be used for safety.
- Tools may be used to startle, redirect, or move specific dogs when needed.
    - When used, observe the response of the dog being assessed (and helper dogs).
    - Appropriate use of safety equipment should effectively interrupt the behavior without causing fear or aggression toward the handler or other dogs.
    - Always give a consistent verbal signal (e.g., "uh-uh!") before using any safety equipment with the intent of discouraging a specific behavior.
- Using one's body by stepping in front of a dog (i.e., body blocking) to prevent them from doing something can (a) quickly teach them to look at the handler or listen to the handler's direction (e.g., saying "uh-uh" or giving a cue for a specific behavior) or (b) slow down dogs running through the yard with increasing arousal.
    - Safety equipment (e.g., monster shake or hog board) may be needed to prevent the dog from sneaking around the handler when attempting to body block.

During PGs, dogs should be verbally acknowledged by handlers for making good choices when interacting with other dogs. This may help dogs understand which behaviors are acceptable. It can also minimize the dog's association between the handler and aversive events. Treats and toys can also be used at the handler's discretion to reward good choices. Typically, toys and treats are only introduced in small groups or play pairs of dogs that are unlikely to guard resources.

Group Size

- May be pairs or small groups of up to 5 dogs
- Previous PG notes may aid in planning potential play partners/groups to achieve behavior modification goals

Helper Dogs

- Are not overly sensitive to handler intervention and use of safety equipment

- Enjoy investigating the yard and socializing with people, and may not solicit interaction with other dogs
- Tolerates the presence of dogs playing actively and gives appropriate corrections when rude behavior is directed toward them
- Highly tolerant of or enjoys rough-and-tumble play

Modifying Fear of People

Often, dogs who are fearful of people may be unafraid of other dogs and even enjoy interacting with them. The purpose of these PGs is to use human-social helper dogs to help fearful dogs become more comfortable around people. If available, conduct these PGs in a quiet, low-trafficked yard.

The opportunity to go to a PG can be used as a reinforcer for fearful dogs learning to walk on a leash, particularly if the yard is close to the dog's kennel and the route is relatively quiet. Dogs who do not walk on leash can be transported to the yard in a crate. If the dog is too fearful to exit the crate or airlock into the yard, the Lead may do one or more of the following:

- Remove the top half of the airline crate
- Gently tip the crate so the dog exits
- Set up a portable exercise pen to expand the airlock space to give the dog more room to explore before engaging with other dogs

The Lead should decide whether to conduct gate greetings or let the fearful dog directly into the yard with the helper dogs. If the dog is hesitant to exit the airlock:

- Try giving them space and positioning one's body in a non-threatening way.
- Distract the helper dogs or hold them on a drag line before opening the fearful dog's airlock gate, giving the fearful dog a little time to exit without being overwhelmed.

End the session after 15-20 minutes. Try to make collecting the fearful dog as stress-free as possible. Pick up any uneaten treats from the yard before starting the next PG.

If, after several PGs, the fearful dog is gaining confidence (e.g., approaching handlers alongside helper dogs, showing relaxed body language, repeatedly play-bowing toward handlers, or showing interest in toys), here are some added tips:

- Remember to never force contact with humans
- Try engaging the dog in play.
    - If the dog is alternating between approaching and retreating, try tossing a toy away from you.
- As the dog becomes more comfortable, work up to gently petting them in non-sensitive areas such as their chest, neck, or shoulders.

If the fearful dog doesn't show any improvement or becomes more fearful each time they are brought to the yard, consider trying the following:

- Conduct the PG in a different context (e.g., different-sized yard, quieter area, outdoors, etc.).
- Try other helper dogs.
- Limit the number of people present during PGs and/or use people the dog is familiar with.
- Try giving the dog a temporary break from PGs.
- Switch to fearful dog behavior modification protocols instead (i.e., some dogs do not thrive in PGs but make progress with focused behavior modification sessions with experienced staff or volunteers).

Personnel

- Because these dogs are fearful, the number of handlers in the yard should be kept to a minimum.
- Ideally, the Assistant(s)/Runner(s) are familiar to the fearful dogs and should walk dogs in pairs to the yard (e.g., a helper dog with a fearful dog).
- Intervening between dog interactions should be kept to a minimum (e.g., simply taking a few steps toward the dogs or giving a light verbal interrupter is often enough).
- Be mindful of body position and movement around the dogs. Handlers should angle their body sideways and avert their gaze slightly if a dog looks at or approaches them. Avoid moving quickly or speaking loudly. If it is appropriate and safe, crouch down on one knee when a fearful dog approaches.
- Sometimes the following can help:
    - Ensure handlers have bite-sized treats in pouches or pockets, especially if the likelihood of resource guarding is low.
    - Ignore the fearful dog or periodically toss them a treat. If they approach, remain quiet and still, let them sniff and then offer a few treats by dropping them on the ground rather than hand feeding.
- Interact freely with helper dogs while taking care not to scare the fearful dogs.

Safety Equipment

- Attach drag lines to fearful dogs before letting them into the yard so it is easy to collect them at the end of the PG. If a dog is crated, drag-line attachment while the dog is still in the crate is often the least stressful method.
- Avoid unnecessary use of loud or otherwise aversive safety equipment.

Group Size

- It is best to have 4-5 helper dogs and 2-3 fearful dogs, or at least more helper dogs than fearful ones.

Helper Dogs

- Must be both dog- and human-social with a variety of dogs and humans, with a history of relaxed and friendly behavior in PGs.

Figures

Figure 1. *Airlock entrances to the yard with two gates, one into the airlock and one into the yard, to prevent dogs from escaping and to give the handler a safe space to remove the dog's leash or other equipment before entering the yard.*

Figure 2*. Additional 5'x5' airlocks on opposite sides of yard*

Figure 3. *Pools are filled with water to provide a water source for the dogs. They can also serve as an obstacle and added enrichment.*

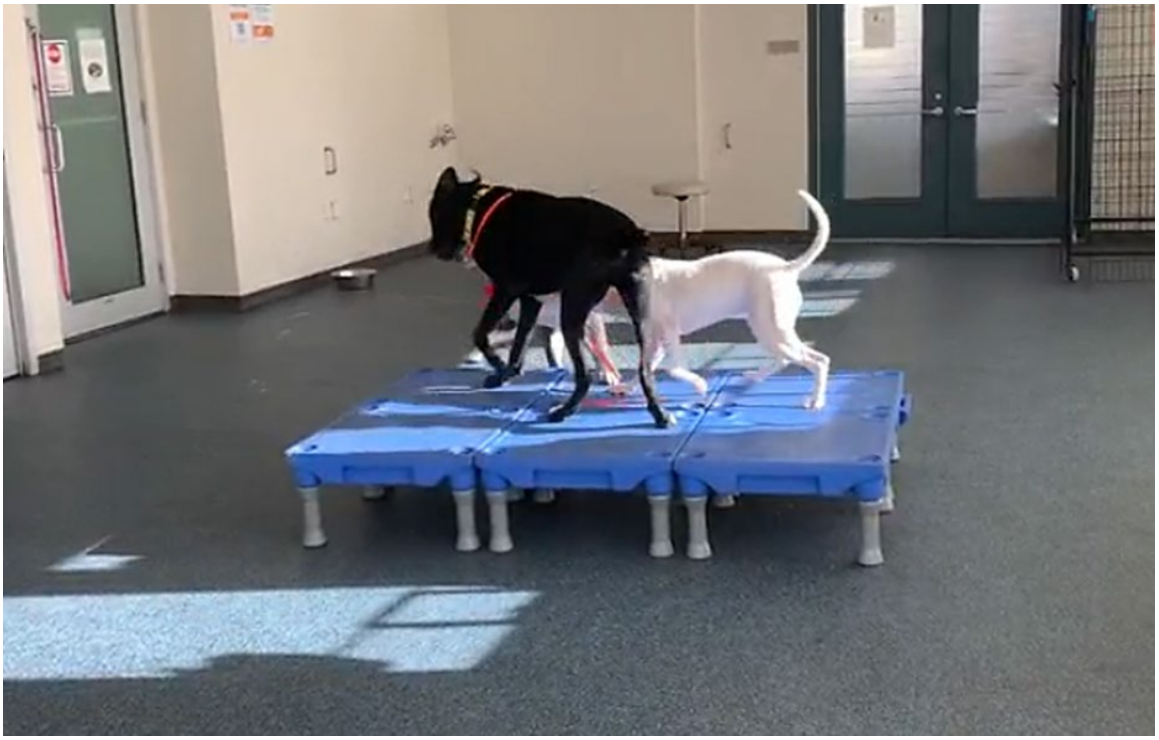

Figure 4*. Raised platforms used as an obstacle in playgroup*

***Figure 5**. Fifty-gallon barrel cut in half as an obstacle in playgroup*

***Figure 6.** Large tire creates an obstacle in playgroup. Also note the 50-gallon barrel with ends removed to create a tunnel/hide.*

***Figure 7**. Plastic water trough (for livestock) flipped over and used as an obstacle in playgroup*

***Figure 8**. Plastic stairs can be used as a stand-alone obstacle or combined with another obstacle like this large pool. Also note the sprinkler and splash pad water feature for added enrichment.*

Figure 9. *These are examples of the necessary equipment in each safety bucket.*

Figure 10*. Round winter sled, Kuranda bed, and hog board are examples of tools to block visual contact and/or move a dog safely without physical handling.*

***Figure 11**. Drag lines (thin, lightweight leash attached to dog's collar or harness, generally made of BioThane®)*

***Figure 12**. Two different playgroup-appropriate muzzles*

Resources

ASPCA Learn: Canine Behavior Interventions: Playgroups Presentation by Katy Mahaley at the 2024 Shelter Medicine Conference.

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