

The IAABC Journal

A publication of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants, <http://iaabc.org>

Article published in the Winter 2019 edition of the IAABC Journal on February 15, 2019

The Shelter Playgroup Alliance

Mara Velez, MA, CPDT-KA

How the Shelter Playgroup Alliance (SPA) Started

Toward the end of 2017, I was putting the final touches on a canine enrichment program for the open-admission, high-volume shelter at which I am a behavior and training consultant. I started to develop an inter-dog playgroup protocol and training for our staff and volunteers. In the years prior, I had been running playgroups at several shelters prior to working at my current shelter. As a result, I had a foundation of knowledge and experience that I could use to draft the protocol, and I also wanted to get an idea of how others were managing inter-dog play. My purpose was to ensure that the dogs were having a good time, introduced properly, and their arousal levels were managed so as to not create behavioral or health problems down the road. I had seen the fallout of less-than-careful management of inter-dog interactions, as well as the fallout of the use of punishment and flooding in shelter playgroups, and was not willing to put dogs and humans in high-risk situations. So, I started asking around.

Kiem Sie, a shelter behavior colleague, and I went to visit with Lisa Mullinax, and we all agreed that it would be amazing to bring together shelter behavior professionals from Northern California to discuss how they approached inter-dog interactions while adhering to the LIMA ethical guideline. It was from that conversation that the concept for the Shelter Playgroup Alliance was born. Kiem, Lisa and I became SPA core team members, and we added Kristin White, the fourth member to help us plan and manage the event. We proceeded to set an agenda and invite shelter behavior and training professionals we knew might be interested in the discussion. What we thought was going to be a small, day-long gathering of 10 to 15 people ended up being a two-day weekend event with 44 people, presentations, and a lot of active discussion on how to facilitate LIMA-based playgroups and inter-dog interactions.

As a result of that weekend, 15 of the attendees volunteered to collaboratively create the Shelter Playgroup Guidelines. Our guidelines have been developed for, and by, shelter professionals who have a wide range of experience in open- and limited-admission shelters across the country. Divided into three working teams, the contributors drafted guidelines, which were compiled and edited by me in preparation for testing at six Denver-area shelters over the course of the first week of December. As a result, we are in the process of adding details to the guidelines and new content that addresses items that came up during the testing in the greater Denver area.

Core Concepts

Guidelines, Not a Protocol

We have developed the guidelines to be clear, yet flexible, so that shelters can implement them, regardless of the features of the shelter. As each one of us in sheltering knows, if you've seen one shelter, you've seen one shelter. Rather than taking a "one best way" protocol approach, we have drafted flexible guidelines and recommendations for implementing safe inter-dog interactions.

LIMA-based Tools and Strategies

Our shelter playgroup guidelines are based on the Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive (LIMA) ethical principles adopted by several certifying bodies, like the IAABC and CCPDT. Through the application of and adherence to LIMA, we promote healthy inter-dog interactions through the use of positive reinforcement as the first line of inter-dog interaction management. The use of punishment, e.g., startling noises or water from a squirt bottle in lieu of other effective interventions and strategies is simply not justified (IAABC, 2018). We advocate that handlers always wear a treat pouch filled with food rewards and be skilled at reinforcing desired behaviors throughout play sessions. When used with skill, food should not elicit guarding behaviors during playgroups. Dogs who exhibit guarding behaviors may not be good candidates for playgroups. While dogs may meet initially on a slip lead or leash wrap, we recommend handlers fit dogs for a harness with a drag line before entering the play space. Even if the dogs don't end up having a play-type interaction, having a low stress meet-and-greet can be a positive experience for each dog.

Once more than one dog is in the yard, the handler should be prepared to intervene, and trained to begin with the least intrusive method of intervention, then escalate to more intrusive. When the dog interaction or play is to be interrupted, a toy that squeaks can redirect the attention of the dogs. We recommend a squeaker or something similar so that the tone is neutral, unlike a human voice. If there is a need to escalate beyond that, which should be only in a limited number of cases if the dogs are truly consenting to play, then the use of a poster board, the lid of a large plastic container, a wood board, or similar can be used as a visual break to interrupt a hard stare between dogs so that handlers can secure the dogs and remove them from the play yard. If the dogs begin to engage in a fight, then the use of a hose or a bucket of water as a punisher or interrupter is appropriate. Start with a sprinkle above the two dogs engaging in aggressive behaviors, and escalate to a spray to the faces of the dogs. Handlers can also use a metal bowl against a fence, or two metal bowls together, which can invoke a startle response that may redirect the dogs or interrupt the behavior enough to gain control of the animals before contact. Be aware that a loud noise can also have an effect on dogs that are not involved in the altercation, and can frighten noise-sensitive dogs or fearful dogs. All of that said, in my experience, it's rare to escalate to the use of a punisher when the dogs are choosing to engage with other dogs.

Shelter Dog Playgroups Are Just One Part of an Enrichment Program

It is our belief that it is important to underscore that shelter dog playgroups should never be a single enrichment strategy for the animals in a shelter's care. Providing inter-dog play as an enrichment activity should be one of many enrichment opportunities for dogs who enjoy the company of other dogs, and more specifically, the company of the specific dog they are introduced to. If the dogs are not enjoying the interaction, it's not enrichment. Emily Strong, one of our contributors, articulates this nicely in her 2017 IAABC Journal article, *Playgroups the LIMA Way*.

Providing Choice

Providing animals choice and respecting their needs is a cornerstone of excellent animal care (Friedman, 2018). Not all dogs want to play with

other dogs. In addition to using inter-dog play as an enrichment strategy for those dogs that enjoy play with their conspecifics, we also highlight some enrichment alternatives for those dogs that don't benefit from inter-dog play. Animals that 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 the dogs' responses to "consent tests," we can facilitate healthy inter-dog play.

Minimizing Stress and High Arousal

Chronic stress and excessive high arousal can be detrimental to the long-term health of all animals (Bartlett, 2017; Arthur, 2009). 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 (Barrett, 2017). Additionally, we recommend limiting the number of dogs in each playgroup and maximizing dog-handler ratios; this helps to ensure a safe and fun play environment by providing handlers with the ability to intervene quickly and carefully watch play interactions. We avoid the use of flooding (Staub, 1968) and aversives so that the animals in our playgroups can develop positive associations with other dogs, as well as handlers.

Building Skills for Home

The 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. This practice sets up the dog for success when they visit the dog park or are hiking off-leash, as we suggest building a learning history for a good recall with their future adopter.

Training Staff and Volunteers

Managing safe and healthy inter-dog play is an advanced skill, and it may take a long time to develop the appropriate knowledge and skill among non-behavior staff and volunteers.

Based on each shelter's needs, and space, there will be necessary customizations to the guidelines, including determining staff and volunteer roles and levels. Once determined, the next step before starting playgroups is training staff and volunteers on inter-dog communication and play, the customized guidelines, leash handling, conducting dog-dog introductions, managing play using the tools, how to intervene in a fight, and how to document observations during play or dog interactions.

Playgroups for Behavior Modification

For the most part, we recommend that shelter dog playgroups be used solely for enrichment, not behavior modification. However, if there are excellent handlers and experienced trainers on staff or as volunteers, carefully managed playgroups can help dogs with a play skill deficit learn positive skills for their future home, so long as 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 to other dogs. I have personally seen what have been termed "helper" dogs suffer behavioral consequences from being overused with rude or pushy dogs.

This type of behavior modification playgroup requires an advanced knowledge of inter-canine body language, proactive play interruption skills to prevent escalation, and a firm grasp of behavior modification and training concepts and techniques to create a safe and consenting environment for all canines involved. 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.

Guideline Development: Where We've Been; Where We Are Headed

As I mentioned, we spent a week at six shelters testing our guidelines, and identifying areas for adding more detail and new content, including training materials and videos. Most of the shelters that we visited are large city and county open-intake shelters, most of which have an intake in excess of 5,000 animals per year. At most shelters, we provided an overview of and discussed the guidelines, and then demonstrated the concepts and guidelines with their shelter animals. Each day was different, and we learned a lot about how to potentially implement the guidelines at shelters across the country, potential questions and concerns that might come up, some ideas about how to adjust, and how to better communicate our message about LIMA-based playgroups and canine enrichment.

Some of the feedback that we received included a recommendation to highlight that this playgroup model is for enrichment and behavior modification, not assessing aggression or fear thresholds in dogs. The participants in the testing phase also recommended that we add flow charts for decision-making. For example, if a dog decides that they do not want to participate in play today, what is the next step to provide that dog appropriate enrichment? And, if the dog really does want to participate in play, but has play skill deficits, then what is the next step to create a behavior modification plan for that dog? We also had great discussions about risk tolerance at different shelters. As a result, we are in the process of adding different levels of risk tolerance and aligning specific practices to each level of risk. For example, shelters with a high risk tolerance will drop leashes later than shelters with a lower risk tolerance. And, shelters with a high risk tolerance may wait longer to interrupt play, and shelters with a lower risk tolerance may interrupt play more frequently. And finally, since we feel strongly that playgroups are not a single-pronged enrichment strategy, we will be adding details on other forms of shelter dog enrichment, including how to implement auditory, tactile, scent, and human-interaction based enrichment.

The Future for the Shelter Playgroup Alliance

We will be formally rolling out the written guidelines at the 2019 Shelter Playgroup Alliance Summit in Sacramento in early May. Our amazing group of guideline contributors are continuing to develop content that will be posted on our YouTube channel, adding to the written guidelines, and adding to training materials. You can find out more about us, and keep up to date on our goings on by signing up for our newsletter at <http://www.shelterdogplay.org> and by joining us in May in Sacramento at our Shelter Playgroup Alliance Summit.

References

1. Arthur, N. (2009). *Chill out fido! How to calm your dog*. Dogwise Publishing.
2. Barrett, L.F. (2017). *How emotions are made: The secret life of the brain*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
3. Bartlett, S. (2017). *Smashing mindset*. Thrive Publishing.
4. Friedman, S. (2018). Please Sir! May I have some food, water, and ... control? ClickerExpo, Irvine, CA.
5. International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) Position on LIMA (<https://m.iaabc.org/about/position-statements/lima/>)
6. Staub E. (1968). Duration of stimulus-exposure as determinant of the efficacy of flooding procedures in the elimination of fear. *Behavior Research and Therapy*, 6, 131-132.
7. Strong, E. (2017). Playgroups the LIMA way. *IAABC Journal*