

Playing with a Purpose

Aimee Sadler shows shelters how to socialize dogs through play groups

BY JAMES HETTINGER



Aimee Sadler, an animal trainer who specializes in play groups to socialize dogs and straighten out problem behaviors, finds an attentive audience at Longmont Humane Society in Colorado.

At the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter (BARCS), animal care attendant/enrichment coordinator Brian George has a simple summation of the play groups the shelter began running earlier this year: “It’s about letting dogs be dogs, you know?”

Dogs in the BARCS play groups run and play in fenced yards furnished with hoses, small plastic swimming pools, sand, beach umbrellas, basketballs, volleyballs, and tennis balls—“everything we can think of,” George says.

“When they’re out in play group, it’s great stimulation for them physically and mentally,” he explains. “So when they’re back

in the kennel in their cages, their cage behavior is just really improved. The better behaved they are in the cage, the better their chances are of getting adopted.”

The play groups, which have quickly become an essential part of the enrichment program at the shelter, grew out of a two-day training session conducted at BARCS last spring by Aimee Sadler, a veteran animal trainer specializing in behavioral problems.

The director of training and behavior for both the Longmont Humane Society in Colorado and the Southampton Animal Shelter Foundation in New York, Sadler travels the

country teaching shelters how to implement play groups. Having grown up in a home with multiple dogs, she says the approach comes naturally to her. Some shelters resist the idea, fearing that fights will break out. Sadler shows them that the groups can be run safely, no matter what breeds you have, if you divide the dogs according to compatible play styles.

Sadler touts what she sees as the many benefits of play groups. They’re a natural way for dogs to blow off steam and counteract the stresses of shelter life. Through group interactions, dogs teach each other how to behave, addressing such problems as resource guard-

ing, dog-on-dog aggression, and on-leash reactivity. Letting dogs “get their ya-yas out together” is a more efficient use of staff and volunteer time than having people walk dogs individually, Sadler notes, and cleaning the kennels can go quicker if the timing is coordinated with play group so that the cages are empty.

Some may worry about the possibility of

play groups causing an increase in disease transmission, but Sadler asserts that more enrichment means less stress, which equates to less disease. It’s important to vaccinate dogs upon intake, and to limit play groups in the event of medical concerns such as the presence of parvo. Your medical team and your behavioral team need to work together and be flexible, Sadler advises. Each shelter should take its resources into consideration and weigh the program’s risks and benefits.

In the excerpted interview below, Sadler discusses her techniques with *Animal Sheltering* associate editor James Hettinger.

Animal Sheltering: How did you first get into play groups for dogs?

Aimee Sadler: I think I was born into it. Seriously. My mom always rescued dogs. We had a farm in upstate New York, and I remember we had like 17 dogs at one point, hanging out. They all came in the house at night, so they weren’t kept in kennels. That’s how I was raised, around animals like that. It just always felt very intuitive and natural to me.

Can you walk through a typical scenario at a shelter?

When I’m teaching shelters, a lot of times they say, “Do you want to walk through the kennels, and see the dogs’ behavior in the kennels, to pick which ones you want me to bring out to play group?” And the notion that I’m trying to get across to everybody is: That’s not going to tell me anything meaningful. Their behavior behind the barrier, or on the leash, has nothing to do with their ability



Dogs taking part in play groups at the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter get to release their physical and mental energy while learning social skills.

to be social with dogs once they actually have access to them. There’s tons of dogs here—let’s just let them play.

Everybody’s afraid of dogfights or people getting injured, but if you’re handling things correctly, you don’t create [panic and pull] dogs apart. That’s how bad injuries often occur, by handler error, more than the dogs actually doing it to each other. They get into arguments, just like we do, and they work it out, and they can settle disputes, and they can build a skill set in settling disputes.

It’s really nice if you have a couple of yards that are attached, so that you can divide dogs based upon play style. I focus more on that than on actual size. I don’t do anything based on breed—nothing. It’s more just taking a look at them when they come in and doing a quick visual assessment of what you think they’re going to be. We’ve learned that we can’t really predict, but the handler gets to decide: That dog looks edgy; that dog looks like it’s going to need more one-on-one support; or that dog looks like he’s just so happy to play, but he’s pretty rowdy, so let’s not put him in with these more gentle dogs. Then eventually the goal is we open up that space and let everybody flow together.

At the Longmont Humane Society, we’re

averaging about 100 dogs on site. On average, about 80 of them are rated to go to play groups. So we have this pool of socialized dogs who rotate around and meet multiple dogs, and as a result of that, there’s an amazing service that we provide to the community. If somebody has a dog that’s been deemed dog-aggressive—either they’ve had an incident, or they’re just afraid of their dog’s behavior—we have this pool of socialized shelter dogs that we can [use to] help smooth out their dog-aggression issues—[whereas] it’s not appropriate for them to go to a dog park, for example. You don’t want somebody bringing their dog-aggressive dog to the dog park to try to work it out. So it’s actually a phenomenal support system for the community that we happen to specialize in socializing dogs and letting shelter dogs play.

And we have dogs who have been sent to us from other places in the country, that were taken in from cruelty, fight busts, hoarding cases—intact dogs of every breed that then help us smooth out dogs in the community that are having problems. They’re actually like therapy dogs for other dogs.

It’s about using play groups to let the animals show us who they want to be when there isn’t someone there to give them information about how they should behave.

How do you go about ironing out some of their aggressive behaviors?

Sometimes I’ve identified, “You know, that dog is just going to launch on anyone. They don’t care if it’s male or if it’s female.” So I’ve



Play groups can help show shelter staff which dogs get along well with each other. When you know more about their dog-to-dog social skills, you can make better adoption matches, notes trainer Aimee Sadler.

[q&a]

identified that dog as dog-aggressive. It's rare that that happens. Muzzles are a really great way to start. You can prevent them from following through, reinforcing the behavior of fighting, and you pick other dogs who will be able to emotionally and physically withstand this one being incredibly rude. With a muzzle, you don't have to worry about the damage. As a handler, you don't have to overhandle the situation. You're setting them up to be able to step out of it and let another dog teach them: "That is ridiculous. Don't be doing that to me." And you choose dogs that are going to communicate clearly with that one, and teach them another option.

It depends on what dogs you have available. It's important that you have the right kind of dogs to communicate clearly with the one that's having the trouble. Sometimes you need dogs that are very strong in their personalities, very assertive, and then sometimes you want dogs that are so happy-go-lucky playful they're like, "Dude! What's your problem? Chill out." You have to pick which one you think is going to suit. That comes from experience. This is definitely something you have to have some intuition about. It's not something that I'll ever write a manual [about]—it's more basic strategies, basic principles of learning, basic personality types and play styles in dogs, and then getting a feel for how to put that together for yourself.

And I can't tell you that I've been successful every single time, that every dog that's sent to me for dog-aggression issues, I'm able to resolve that issue. Sometimes what I can do is actually identify, "Yes, this dog is actually dog-aggressive—it will fight with a male or a female, and I can tell you that unequivocally, because I've given them an opportunity to show me something different, and this is what they choose to do." Sometimes that's the answer, and whether that dog is an adoption candidate then depends upon what agency is responsible for [him], what community they're going into, [and] what adoption follow-up resources are available.

What do the dogs get out of this style of play?

They get to burn energy in a different way than going on a walk with somebody. If you think about coming out of a small enclosure, and then being on a 6-foot leash, and going



Kimm Tarantino, a volunteer at the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter, watches two dogs burn off some energy in a play yard.

for a 15-minute walk, that's probably, for a lot of dogs that have arousal issues, more of a frustrating experience—frustrating for the handlers and the dogs. But this actually allows them to get their ya-yas out differently—full physical and mental expression.

So your message has generally been well-received?

There's an intuitive piece to letting dogs run around and play in large groups. Some people are truly scared of it; they've either had bad experiences, or it doesn't feel natural to them. Some people just have a really strong resistance to it. I always coach shelters: Don't make the decision that, "OK, our training and behavior person is the one that's going to run play groups," because maybe that person doesn't feel comfortable with it. But maybe you have a kennel attendant that's like, "Hey, I worked in doggie day care before. I love doing this stuff." Allow for a natural comfort level and natural intuition about it to take the lead. Because then you'll be more successful, rather than trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

The overall goal is you'll have better-adjusted dogs and a higher release rate?

Yes, definitely a higher release rate, because it helps you to combat behavioral deterioration from a typical kennel environment.

[And] let's say you're getting taxed for space. Now you can start putting dogs together and having them cohabitate in a healthier, more appropriate way, and the process of how you get there is also faster. It used to take two kennel supervisors, they'd do their best guess to think which dogs would do OK together, and then they would go outside and walk them on a leash next to each other, and then they'd do an on-leash introduction, and then they'd put them in the kennel, and sit and observe them for 15 minutes. We're talking about two staff people for 30 minutes, to try to get two dogs to live together.

Now, they run out to play group, we notice, "Oh, those two are playing great together, so when that one goes in, instead of putting him in No. 37, go ahead and put him back in No. 46, with Eddie." So it's just an efficiency thing there. You have much more comprehensive information about what their dog-to-dog skills are. We can tell [potential adopters], "Here's our population of dog-social dogs." We can do much better adoption matches.

Am I advocating stuffing as many dogs into kennels as possible, as a result of play groups? No. But what I'm suggesting is there's a possibility that you might have many dogs living in your single dog runs who would be much happier with a companion with them. If that's the case, identify that, and don't make an across-the-board policy that we won't let dogs live together unless we're overcrowded, because you might be missing an opportunity to better enrich a couple of dogs.

What would be your pitch to a shelter that had heard about play groups and wanted to know more?

The pitch is that, remember, it's actually the more natural state for a dog to be in. They are supposed to be pack animals. And that the benefits far outweigh whatever risks you have in the back of your mind. I can't promise anybody that dogfights won't happen, but the big picture is we've been doing it all over the place, and everybody's feeling a huge relief as a result of implementing a program like this. **AS**