

The HOW: Playgroup Handling



Unexpected Benefits

"Has implementing playgroups improved the handling skills of your staff/volunteers?"

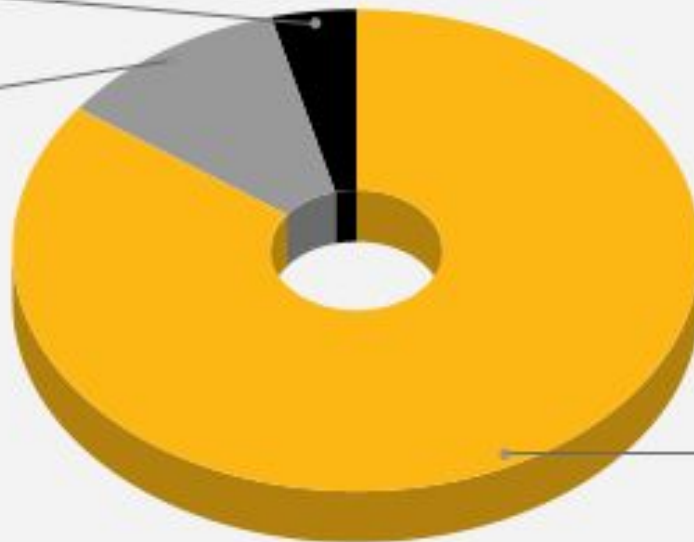
Total Responses: 141

No

4.0%

Unsure

11.0%



Yes

85.0%



Lead Handler Qualifications

- **CONFIDENCE!!!**
- Comfortable with multiple dogs
- Flexible, open-minded, spontaneous
- Team player
- Strong communication skills
(with people and animals!)
- Strong leadership qualities
(with people and animals!)
- Willingness to be wrong and to learn from mistakes
- Notice what's missing?...

**FORMAL EXPERIENCE or
CERTIFICATION**



Brian George, BARCS



Let's Zoom Out For Just a Minute



- Quality of life, stress reduction, increased welfare— all **universal goals of playgroup programs**
- The single greatest way to increase welfare/decrease stress is to **get the dog out of the shelter**
- Regular participation in playgroups often leads to **increased placement pathways** (rescue, foster, adoption)
- Only the dogs who participate in playgroups are able to reap these benefits, therefore we must strive to be as inclusive as possible so we can **benefit as many dogs as possible**



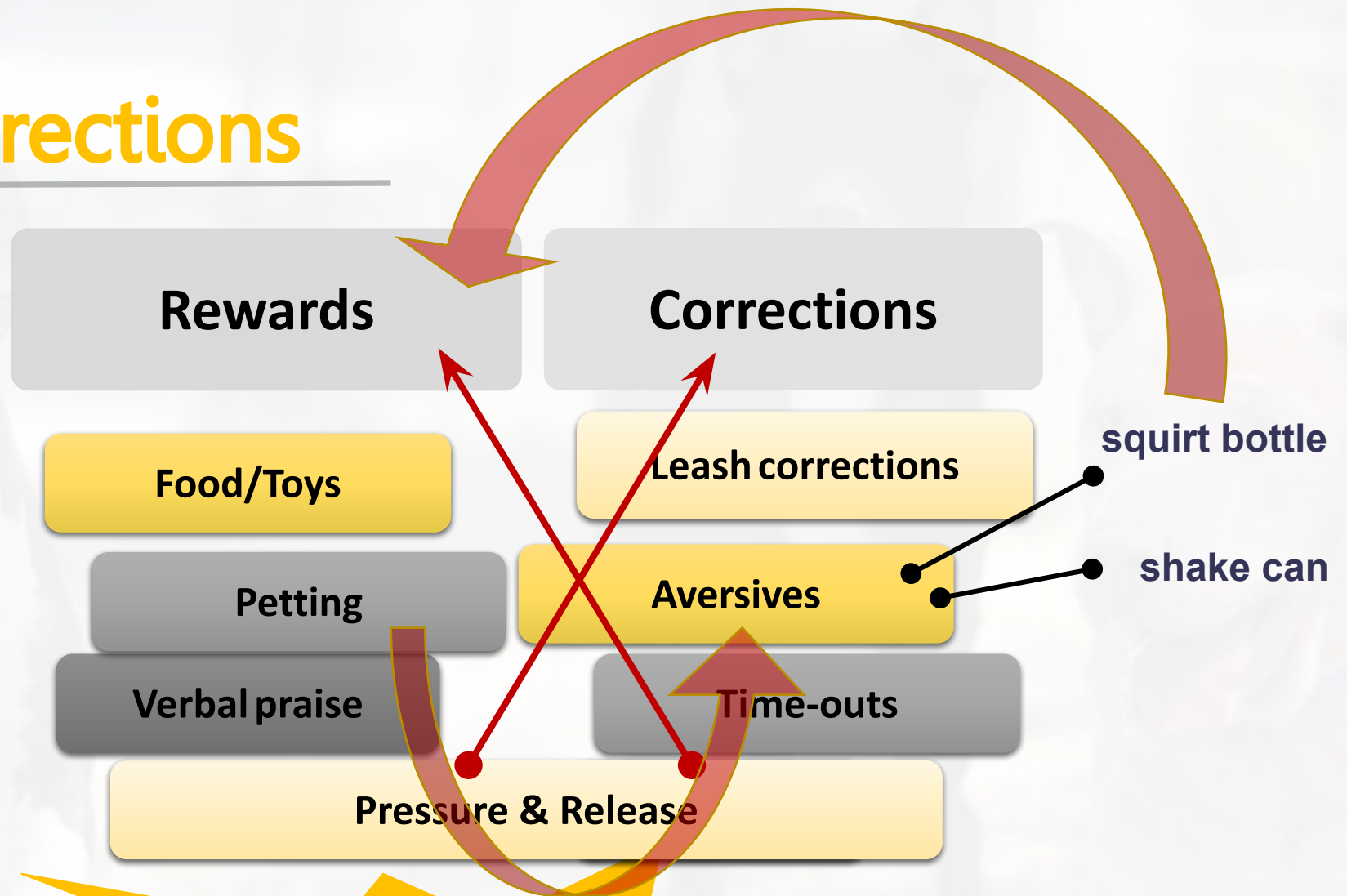
A Brief Discussion on Aversives



- Embracing and mastering the **appropriate use** of aversive tools such as spray bottles, shake cans, or compressed air can allow playgroup programs to include the greatest number of dogs, thereby **increasing welfare and placement pathways for the largest number of dogs.**
- When handlers are able to provide **timely and proportionate information to the dogs, the dogs can be empowered to learn**, improve their communication, and ultimately gain increased opportunities for enrichment, training, and more comprehensive information to aid placement efforts.
- LIMA (Least Invasive Minimally Aversive) must still be adhered to, but **must also be extended to the experience our dogs have when *not* in playgroup** and the potential repercussions of depriving them (solitary confinement, shelter stress, extended LOS, euthanasia)



Rewards and Corrections



THE DOG DECIDES!

Training – Cars and Canoes



“Working dogs is like driving a car: you need gas, brakes, and steering—the amount of each depends upon the car model and road conditions”

Waleed Maalouf, Complete Canine

- **Gas** = enthusiasm, drive
- **Brakes** = extinction
- **Steering** = impulse control

“Training with all four quadrants is like steering a canoe with the paddle on both sides”

Aimee Sadler, Dogs Playing for Life



Steering = Momentary Interruption

- The goal of interruption is to **momentarily influence interaction**
- When the **behavior is more inappropriate than concerning** – think nuisance more than correction
 - HINT: Sound and touch accentuate one another
- **Only necessary if dogs are not responding to one another**
 - REMEMBER – the goal is for the dogs to learn how to communicate with *each other!*
- **“Say it THEN spray it!”** to establish verbal control from a distance



Brakes = Stop!

Turn up the Volume

- A correction with the goal of **immediately and more urgently interrupting a behavior** that must stop
- Behavior is **concerning and must not escalate**
- Dog needs to show **increased responsiveness to handler and/or the other dogs**
- **Deference** = ears back/eye contact
- **Distracting is not teaching**—no information provided. Correction can provide supportive information



Photo by Josh Feeney

Handheld Tools and Application

	Steering	Brakes	Single Dog	Multiple Dogs *Audible for Multiple
Spray Bottle	✓	✓	✓	
Shake Can Monster Shake Can	✓	✓		✓
Pet Corrector™		✓		✓
Air Horn		✓		✓

Be creative! No limitations in tools.
Remember: Audible for Multiple!



Potential Side Effects of Audible Tools

Shake Can (audible)

- 'Innocent' dog is affected in addition to 'offending' dog
- Fear of handler

Pet Corrector™ (audible)

- 'Innocent' dog is affected in addition to 'offending' dog
- Fear of handler
- **HIGHEST RISK OF REDIRECTION!**

Air Horn (SUPER audible)

- Affects all dogs
- Physical reaction to extreme volume
- Generalized fear of handler and/or play yard



Work That Gate!

- This is where you establish yourself and **strengthen your skills**
- **Embrace taking space!**
- **Balance** between taking a moment to observe and building frustration
- Open in or out: **drive or draw?**
- Goal is to **reinforce correct energy upon entrance**
- **No conclusions based upon BR**, just setting up for success



Photo Courtesy of Purina/Lou Bopp

Strengthening Your Technique

Verbal Control:

- Less is more
- Consistent negative marker;
“Say it THEN spray it!”
- Low, not loud
- Accentuate with tools

Your Positioning:

- Don't hover!
- Think pool lifeguard

Calm & Cool Demeanor:

- Conveys to the dogs that you are capable of leading
- Confidence = subtle
- Insecurity = exaggerated
- You “read right” to the dogs when your voice, body language, and use of tools are aligned



As Per Kodi Sadler: "Think Beam of Energy"



FRONT = push, send away

SIDE = pull, draw

BACK = neutral safe space



Setting Up for Success

Collars

- Properly fitted
- Collar vs. necklace
- Easy-removal clasp required

Dragging Leashes

- All unknown dogs
- Dogs with potential handling issues
- When there is no catch pen

Prevention Gear

- **Gentle Leader** for potential suppression effect
- **Muzzle**
 - Motivation for aggression?
 - Defensive?
 - Offensive?
 - **When in doubt, MUZZLE! – you can always take it off!**



When Do They Need You?

- **Permission to test steering**
 - **When their play is not mutual**
 - **When one is having fun at the expense of the other**
 - **When the response is disproportionate to the feedback from the other dog**
-
- **Bring down the energy** - EXAMPLE: When they are struggling to complete the greeting ritual due to arousal, immaturity, fear, etc.
 - **When an actual fight breaks out** (providing information for behavior is less risky than “punishing the thought”)



Better Safe Than Sorry


- Be a **neutral hall monitor**
- Keep your **yard free of toys, treats** = potential trigger
- **Check collars are fit properly** (loose ones can be a hazard)
- Pools instead of buckets/bowls
- **Remove dragging leashes once comfortable**
- Don't allow the dogs to play with equipment
- **Remove certain training equipment** (Haltis, metal pinch collars, slip collars, leashes with extra handle near the clip)



Photo by Greg Sanderson

It's Not IF, it's WHEN

Keep Your Cool and Focus on Safety

1. Always try **startling tools first** 
2. If startling fails, **be quiet and calm**
3. **REMOVE EXTRANEIOUS DOGS**
4. **If leashes are attached, USE THEM!**
5. **If muzzled, OK to handle**
6. **Be prepared for redirection with physical contact**
7. **Grab hind ends before collars**
8. **DO NOT PULL DOGS APART** if latched on



It's Not IF, it's WHEN

Keep Your Cool and Focus on Safety

9. Immobilize the latched-on dog and “**feed the bite**” and twist the collar
10. **Be mindful of defensive mouths** and remove your hands, if necessary, to avoid handler injury
11. **Use any object** to get between the dogs
12. **Only pull dogs apart once they have let go of each other**
13. Whenever possible do *behavioral* **CPR (Continue, Play, Recover!)**
14. **30 minutes recovery** prior to invasive examination (confer with medical)



Getting Your Party Started!

- Goal is to cycle through **the entire population**
- We will handle the stickier “start-up” and will begin coaching your handlers the second round
- Immediate goal is to **identify the social dogs, especially Greeter/Helper dogs**
 - Greeters/Helpers help introduce rest of population
- Begin **coaching handlers in the yard** once we’ve seen all the dogs during first round
- We help to **determine how many handlers and runners** will maintain the appropriate flow
- We make **yard modification recommendations** for efficiency and safety
- **#1 goal is setting the dogs and people up for success after we leave!**
- **Please ask before filming**



Not Just Our Opinion

New research by Dr. Mehrkam of the Human-Animal Wellness Collaboratory at Monmouth University supports playgroup implementation in shelters

Dr. Pamela Reid, ASPCA:
“...most progressive behavior program”

The Bark Magazine
“Shelter Playgroups - Serious Play”

Psychology Today
“The Power and Importance of Social Play for Sheltered Dogs”
- Dr. Mark Bekoff

Sponsored by: Animal Farm Foundation, ASPCA, Best Friends Animal Society, Maddie’s Fund, Petco Foundation



Shelter Me - PBS & Netflix
“New Beginnings”

Endorsed by HSUS
Daylong DPFL course at Animal Care Expo 2015

Participation in **Cortisol Study** in August 2009 revealed that playgroups help to reduce stress in shelter dogs!

Belpedio, C., Buffington, L., Clusman, S., Prete, F., Sadler, A., Whittemore, L., & Mungre, S. (2010). Effect of multidog play-groups on cortisol levels and behavior of dogs (Canis lupus familiaris) housed in a humane society. Journal of Applied Companion Animal Behavior, 4(1), 15-27



Let's Review

- **Adjustable/Scalable** (not one-size-fits-all)
- **Practice Makes Perfect** (for dogs and people!)
- **Strive for inclusion** to benefit highest percentage of dogs
- Develop **other enrichment/training programs** for non-PG dogs
- **Think macro** when assessing approach and risk ("***What If's***" ***should include what happens to the dogs who are prohibited from playgroup***)
- At full implementation, **playgroup is a multi-faceted tool of paramount importance to every organization's mission:** **Fundamental Enrichment**

Assessment

Training

Behavior Modification



Dogs
Playing for
Life



*With nearly 400 shelters served so far and many more on the horizon, we are excited for shelters to realize the profound and positive changes that can occur when **Every Dog** is given the chance to thrive **Every Day!***