



Playgroup Survey Report

About the survey

In May of 2018, Maddie's Institute® conducted a survey in order to gather information about general dog playgroup practices at different animal organizations. The survey was sent out via Maddie's Fund's email list, Adopt-a-Pet's newsletter and Best Friends' network partner list. Organizations that currently utilize playgroups were allowed to take the survey. In total, 250 unique organizations' representatives completed the survey.

Executive Summary

Exercise and interaction with other canines are beneficial to dog well-being (Wells, 2003; Belpedio et al., 2010). Kenneled dogs that have an opportunity to have social contact and play with one another show less stress-related behavior as well as lower cortisol levels (Belpedio et al., 2010). Many shelters strive to offer a variety of enrichment to kenneled dogs, and playgroups have become a common practice. However, little is known about their use within the sheltering industry. The aim of this study was to gather information about the use of playgroups in animal shelters.

An online survey was conducted in order to gather information about dog playgroup practices at animal shelters in the United States. In total, 250 unique organizations' representatives completed the survey. Municipal and non-profit organizations of varying sizes were well represented in the survey (Table 1, Table 2). The majority of the organizations in the survey utilize playgroups three to five times per week or more (Table 3). On average, 50% of a shelter's dog population participates in playgroup and the average size was eight dogs per playgroup. Only 48% (N=119) of shelters allow dogs

of all sizes/weight in one playgroup; the rest have playgroups based on dogs' sizes (Table 7, Table 8). There was a statistically significant difference between an organization's intake and the percent of dogs that participate in playgroups as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F = 3.501$, $p = 0.005$). A Tukey post hoc test revealed that the percent of dogs participating in playgroups was significantly higher in shelters with intakes of between 0-99 dogs (Mean(SD)=65(29)) than in shelter with intakes of 500-999 dogs (Mean(SD)=44(21), $p=0.026$), shelters with intakes of 5,000-9,999 dogs (Mean=42(22) , $p=0.039$) and shelters with intakes of 10,000 or more dogs (Mean=39(26), $p=0.017$). However, for playgroups that mixed dogs by size, organizations with higher dog intakes tended to have larger playgroups (Kruskal Wallis Test $\chi^2(2) = 15.59$, $p=0.008$, $N=113$). Organizations were asked to specify reasons why they do not allow to some dogs to participate in playgroups. The main reason was aggression to dogs followed by post-surgery recuperation (Table 4, Table 5, Table 6).

The majority (71%) of organizations used mixed tools and techniques (reinforcing desired and correcting undesired behavior) to influence dog behavior while in playgroup (Table 9). Voice-to-correct was the most common tool used to modify dog behavior during playgroup (Table 10). Dog fights were uncommon; 61% reported zero fights and 24% reported just one fight in the last ten playgroup sessions (Table 11). Serious fights that were difficult to break up and fights resulting in wounds requiring medical attention were also very uncommon. Over the past year, 21% reported one serious fight, 33% reported two to five serious fights and 7% reported more than five serious fights (Table 12). Bites to people were also uncommon; 10% reported one bite and 12% reported two to five bites over the past year (Table 14).

There was no correlation between the average size of the typical playgroup or number of years that shelters utilized playgroups and an increased risk of fights or injuries. Playgroups were extremely unlikely to be suspected to be the cause of the spread of parvovirus (less than 1% of organizations reported), distemper (0%), and canine influenza (1%) and occasionally suspected as the cause of spread of kennel cough (19%) (Q: How many times *in the past year* have playgroups been strongly suspected of causing the spread of the following diseases?).



This study demonstrated that playgroups are safe for dogs and people, even for organizations with high dog intake. Fights, bites and injuries are very uncommon; however, a small percentage of study participants reported higher rates of bites at their shelters. These organizations might benefit from evaluating their policies and procedures or spending time learning from organizations where bites and fights are rare.

Playgroups provide dogs with social interaction with people and dogs, exercise, and time to explore their environment. Volunteers are often utilized to run or assist with playgroups, saving shelter staff time. Playgroups can provide enrichment for a large number of dogs at one time, and thus are potentially a particularly attractive tool for shelters with a large number of dogs. More research about dog playgroups is needed to evaluate their impact on dog well-being and population health.

References:

- Belpedio C, Buffington L, Clusman S, Prete F, Sadler A, Whittemore L, Mungre S, 2010. Cortisol Level And Behavioral Response To Exercise In Dogs Kenneled In A Humane Society: Model For Stress Relief. Physiology (Abstract).
- Wells DL, 2004. A review of environmental enrichment for kenneled dogs, *Canis familiaris*. Applied Animal Behaviour Science 85: 307-317.

