



THE BEST MEDICINE: PLAYING WITH SHELTER DOGS

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WHAT IS PLAY?

- Ethologists define play as a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities normally associated with pleasure or enjoyment.
- Involves behaviors that are modified from the performance of “serious” behaviors -- exaggerated or incomplete, and repeated in similar patterns
- Any of the following may apply:
 - Done for its own sake (not completely functional at face value); Intentional, Spontaneous; Rewarding, FUN!
- Play is initiated when animals are in a state of well-being.

WHY DO ANIMALS PLAY?

- Crucial role in behavioral development
 - Learning and enhancing social skills
 - Learning and enhancing motor skills and coordination
- Dog – dog play
 - Learn restraint and inhibition over aggression and other socially inappropriate behaviors
 - Puppies who play more may be more social as adults
- Dog – Human play
 - Relationship and bonding
 - Reduces the incidence of behavior problems

DO DOGS RESPOND TO SIGNALS TO PLAY FROM HUMANS?



- Videotaped 21 owners and their dog
- Specific actions used by humans do communicate a playful context to dogs
- Lunging and bowing, especially combined with vocalizing were the most frequent signals to instigate play

Rooney, Bradshaw, Robinson. Do dogs respond to play signals given by humans? *Animal Behaviour*. 61(4) 715-722, 2001.



PLAY AND WELFARE

“Animal welfare is usually considered primarily in terms of the animal’s negative experiences. Four of the ‘Five Freedoms’ are freedoms from unpleasant experiences (hunger/thirst; discomfort; pain/injury/disease; fear/distress), and only one potentially addresses positive aspects of welfare (freedom to perform normal behavior).”

Phillips. Animal welfare: A construct of positive and negative affect? *The Veterinary Journal*. 175; 291–292, 2008.



Welfare is not merely the absence of negative experiences, but also the presence of positive ones.



PLAY AND DOG TRAINING



- Play has been used for decades to enhance dog training
- Motivator, reward
- Condition positive emotional responses (make training fun)
- Reduce stress
- Enhance the dog-handler relationship



RESILIENCE

- In psychiatry, resilience describes an individual's capacity to recover from extremes of emotional trauma and stress.
- Resilience is influenced by many factors including genetics, early life experiences, personality, neurobiology, and many others.
- The influence of play on emotional resilience will likely be a hot topic in the future.



WHY PLAY WITH SHELTER DOGS

- Enhance social and cognitive skills; enrichment, social interaction, exercise, mental stimulation, stress reduction, enhances welfare, promotes positive emotional states, enhances training
- Why else?
- **THE POWER OF CONNECTION**
- Engage the dog and connect!



PROTOPOPOVA, WYNNE. ADOPTER-DOG INTERACTIONS AT THE SHELTER: BEHAVIORAL AND CONTEXTUAL PREDICTORS OF ADOPTION. APPL. ANIM. BEHAV. SCI. (2014).

- Only two behaviors predicted the likelihood of adoption during an interaction with a potential adopter:
- Ignoring play initiation by the potential adopter – very low likelihood of adoption
- Lying down in the proximity of the potential adopter – 14 times more likely to be adopted



WEISS, MILLER, ET AL. WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS PET?: ADOPTERS AND PET SELECTION PREFERENCES IN FIVE ANIMAL SHELTERS IN THE UNITED STATES. ANIMALS 2012, 2(2), 144-159.

- Dogs – physical appearance #1 for adults and puppies (age also very important)
- Behavior with people and playfulness were the next most important reasons
- Interacting with the animal out of his/her enclosure was highly important to adopters



INCREASING ADOPTER APPEAL

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”

--Plato

“You can discover more about a ~~person~~-dog in an hour of play than in a year of ~~conversation~~ looking at him in a kennel.”

--Joe Adopter

PLAY IS A POWERFUL WAY TO CONNECT

WHY PLAY WITH SHELTER DOGS?

- Because it is a FUN!
- Good for the dogs
- Good for the people (staff, volunteers, adopters)
- Play promotes social connection
- The best medicine for all!



TYPES OF PLAY

- Playing with conspecifics (dog-dog play)
 - Benefits of healthy playgroups
 - Dogs are experts at teaching dogs
 - Aimee Sadler – Playing for Life
 - Population medicine!
 - Also great for foster dogs
- Playing with people
 - Toy (object) play
 - Food (play) games
 - Physical play
 - For dogs in the shelter and in foster care!



THINK LIKE A PREDATOR—WHAT'S FUN?



- Running games
- Chasing games
- Hunting games (sniffing games)
- Seek and destroy games
- Jumping games
- Mind games
- Anything “fun” has game potential!



MY TOP 3
FAVORITE GAMES TO PLAY WITH DOGS

1. Fetch
2. Tug
3. Chase

PLAY!



TOY PLAY

- Case example: Cody
 - Toy selection
 - Fetch
 - Chase IT
 - Tug
- Toy play is a foundation for off lead control:
Leash comes off – toy comes out!





MEET BOOGIE WOOGIE PIT BULL:



FETCH!

- o An easy & fun way to teach a dog to play fetch is to use the 2-toy method.
- o Get 2 identical dog toys -- plush dog toys or a ball or whatever the dog likes.
- o Offer the toy and let the dog play with it – Don't take it away from him!
- o Then, wave the other toy – he will likely drop the first one and grab the second one. Alternate the toys, playfully teasing the dog to entice him.
- o Next, begin tossing one of the toys – only a couple of feet at first. As soon as the dog goes to get the toy, call and encourage him to come back – run backwards to encourage him to follow if necessary. When he reaches you, show the other toy. He will probably want to get the other toy. He may drop the other one he has – or you can trade him for a treat. Then, throw the second toy. He will then run after it and you can start the process over again. Start slowly and build up over time.
- o Always stop for the day before your dog tires of the game.
- o *NOTE: Special toys designated for FETCH should be put away unless you are actually playing the game– this will help to keep them fresh and enticing, leaving the dog wanting more.*



CHASE IT!

- o **BE THE SQUIRREL!**



CHASE IT!

- 1. "Be the squirrel!!" -- Use the pole to move the toy on the ground--> erratic motion --> quick hop in the air!!!
- 2. Let dog capture it occasionally.
- 3. Release for treat (toss treat to free the squirrel!)
- 4. Take breaks (squirrel stops moving)
- 5. Finally, the squirrel dies and the game ends.
- 6. Always leave 'em wanting more!



CHASE IT!



- Commercially available
 - Kong Chase It squirrel; Vee Chase and Pull (Clean Run)
- Or, make your own very easily using a horse lunge whip and a dog toy!



"TUG"

- Dog owners have been admonished for decades not to play "tug of war" because of the risk of increasing aggression and/or dominance
- This behavior is not an agonistic behavior (it has nothing to do with conflict resolution between dogs or defensive aggression)
- This is a predatory behavior (chase, grab, shake)

Jean Donaldson



DOES PLAYING TUG-OF-WAR AFFECT THE DOG-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP?

- If the dog “wins”, is the dog establishing dominance?
- 14 Golden Retrievers – 24 sessions of tug
 - ‘Allowed to win’ group
 - ‘Always lost’ group
- Relationship with the experimenter was assessed, via a composite behavioral test, once at the outset and once after each treatment
- “Dominance” not affected
- All dogs scored higher for obedient attentiveness after play treatments, irrespective of whether they won or lost.
- Dogs were more likely to playfully seek attention and were more into the game if allowed to win.

Rooney and Bradshaw. An experimental study of the effects of play upon the dog human relationship. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. 75; 161-176, 2002.

“TUG”

- Dogs do not ascertain rank by grabbing hold of an object and tugging to see “who wins”
- It is a cooperative behavior and very often when one “wins”, the game begins again as they re-engage in tug

“TUG”

- Played **with rules**, tug of war is a tremendous predatory energy burner and good exercise for dog and owner
- The game does not make the dog a predator: he already is one.

BENEFITS OF "TUG"

- Outstanding outlet for predatory behavior
- Efficient in terms of space and time requirements
- A solution to cabin fever!
- Especially important for high drive dogs to have such an outlet: reduces the risk of behavior problems from under-stimulation/arousal problems
- Helps teach impulse control – ON/OFF!
- Great training reward



TUG TOYS





CATCH

- If your dog likes popcorn, it is a great tool to use to teach them this trick – light, big, fluffy, easy to see—and relatively easy to catch.
- Buy a bag and toss them one kernel at the time.
- Some dogs don't try to catch at first – but as the kernels fly gently in their face, they will try!
- Watch those motor skills improve!
- Coordination may take time, but they will develop skill in time!
- Catching is fun and often quite amusing for all involved.



SEE IT – DROP IT

- This game uses food to teach impulse control – the dog learns to wait and look at the food before being cued to GET IT GET IT!
- The game progresses from gently restraining the dog so that he waits and **sees it**, to the dog doing this on his own, to the dog doing it even if the treat is **dropped** or tossed.
- The handler patiently helps the dog succeed with a playful attitude.
- Short sessions will prevent frustration and keep the dog (and handler) in the game.
- This is a handy way to teach stay – all the while the dog just thinks it is a fun game!



TARGETS ARE FUN!



- In dog training, a "target" is anything that the dog must focus on and perform some action towards.
- Trainers use targets to help get dogs into the position they want – or to perform the behaviors that want them to perform.
- Dogs tend to develop strong positive associations with targets – they provide a positive focal point, which is especially helpful for dogs that tend to “worry” or for those that are very “busy”... Focusing on the target is a great thing!
- Targets are very useful for building many skills – (playing many games!) and can be faded as necessary over time.



PLACE

- Wonderful for shy dogs – confidence building – great for them to go to their place and then meet someone – because after all, only GREAT things happen when they are on their place!
- Also helpful for dogs that need to learn impulse control!
- After the dog readily goes to his place when you stand next to it, then it is time to add the command “Place”.
- The next step is to work from a little farther distance away – stand back from the place a couple of feet and stare at it – stay at this distance until the dog goes to his “place” all by himself. Gradually increase the distance you are from the place in small increments.



PHYSICAL PLAY

- Tag
- Hide and seek
- Go wild and freeze
- Touch, spin and other “fun” behaviors



“PRESCRIBING” PLAY

- For behavioral wellness
 - Practical shelter protocols
 - Play to learn good behavioral skills – Playing “Skames”
- For behavior modification
 - Dogs with poor impulse control (jumpy/mouthy/easily aroused)
 - Shy/fearful/anxious dogs
 - Dogs with kennel stress



“PRESCRIBING” PLAY

- For behavioral wellness
 - Practical shelter protocols
 - Play to learn good behavioral skills – Playing “Skames”
- Use it to improve welfare and to market dogs for adoption.



NO EXACT RULES

- Pick games that work for your population
- Of dogs and people
- Great timing not required
- It takes some knowledge of canine body language/signaling – plus common sense, compassion and a light heart.
- Start simple – set up for fun and success
- Target dogs who need play the most



“PRESCRIBING” PLAY

- For behavior modification
 - Dogs with poor impulse control (jumpy/mouthy/easily aroused)
 - Shy/fearful/anxious dogs
 - Dogs with kennel stress
- Play has tremendous potential as a healing therapy to improve behavioral health


