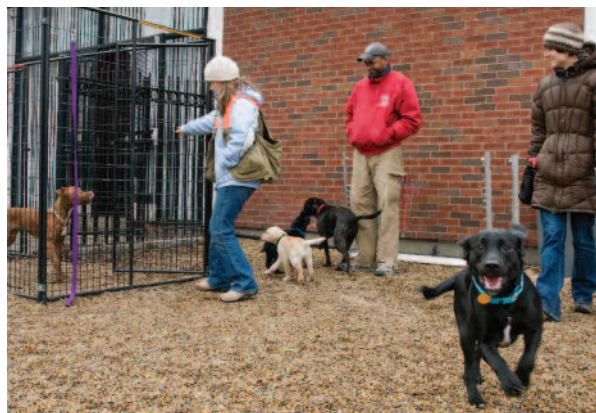


NO BONES about it!

STRUCTURED “RECESS” IS A HIT WITH CANINES AND THE PEOPLE WHO CARE FOR THEM (BUT NO TOYS ALLOWED!)



The Boston shelter's new early morning dog playgroups, based on a program by Aimee Sadler of Colorado's Longmont Humane Society and facilitated by ARLB's Behavior Department is proving to be an enriching highlight of the day for dogs and staff alike.

Boston Shelter Manager Marianne Gasbarro explains that the playgroup is a carefully controlled environment with a (human) leader, assistant and two “runners” bringing to dogs out from the kennel. She emphasizes, “It’s not a free-for-all or a dog park.”

“To be a playgroup leader you need good intuition, the ability to trust your gut and the ability to take charge,” says Gasbarro. “You need to keep a cool head, to be observant and recognize canine body language, which can be more difficult in a playgroup because it can be more subtle. You also need to watch interactions to protect nervous dogs—the purpose of the group is to provide a positive experience and build on that.”

She notes that, being sociable animals, “Most dogs love playing with other dogs. Being in a playgroup relaxes them as well as giving them good exercise. It’s also good for dogs without experience with other dogs—playgroup enhances those socialization skills.”

Toys and treats aren’t allowed because “Certain dogs are possessive and toys and treats can lead to a struggle—it just makes it harder,” Gasbarro explains. In addition, the staff doesn’t distract the dogs or seek their attention—the purpose is to keep the dogs focused on the group.

She notes that little spats between dogs don’t always mean a fight, and they usually de-escalate quickly. “Often, it’s a matter of ‘Let dogs be dogs.’ Obviously, you need to

watch interactions closely to protect nervous dogs—but dogs can correct themselves—it’s a balance. On the other hand, some dogs aren’t meant for a playgroup and they aren’t forced to join in. And if a particular dog is always a pursuer, it might be taken out of the group.”

In noting the playgroup’s positive results, Gasbarro relates the experiences of Blackie, a mix that resembles a Chow and Rocky the Chihuahua. Blackie spent over a year as a stray and was withdrawn and fearful. “When Blackie had the opportunity to interact with other dogs, his demeanor changed completely, and playgroup brought him out of his shell. This allowed us to build trust with him and make him more comfortable around people,” Gasbarro says. Rocky, despite his name, was a passive, fearful dog who at first was afraid of playgroups and people in the kennel. “We slowly brought him into the group and worked through his fear until he became playful and ran with the big dogs, making him friendlier and more trusting.” Both Blackie and Rocky have since been adopted and adjusted well to their new homes.

“The staff knows the dogs better and can knowledgeably discuss possible adoptions” says Gasbarro. “Adopters can also see the dogs in action—often providing a different impression of a dog’s general nature and personality cues.”

Gasbarro concludes, “You don’t often get the pleasure of starting a new program that generates such immediate, tangible benefits. Not only is it great for the dogs, how much better is your day when you begin it by watching animals play!”