

# Dogs Live To Play. Now Let Them Play To Live !



Photo by Josh Feeney

Play Groups: A Game-Changing Enrichment Tool for Shelters



# Play Groups Can Better Forecast A Dog's True Personality.



Dogs Playing for Life (DPFL) is a program rooted in the notion that a dog's natural instinct is to PLAY.

The desire to play does not have to be taught to or learned by most canines. Playing is a dog's most natural form of positive interaction and communication with both humans and fellow canines. A dog at play provides the best opportunity to peer inside the canine soul and explore who the dog really is.

DPFL is an innovative training program that was founded by professional trainer Aimee Sadler. The Program demonstrates both the practical efficiencies of play groups for the rescue organization, as well as the emotional and behavioral benefits for the animals. Play groups have proven to be a critical enrichment and assessment tool for shelters.

The curriculum, taught by Sadler and a visiting DPFL Team, usually involves multiple days of on-site training for shelter staff and



Photo by Josh Feeney

volunteers, including a classroom presentation for participants, the demonstration of safe-handling techniques, and the fundamentals of successful play group experiences for all involved.

Safety protocols for both people and animals are emphasized to ensure that play groups bring out the best in shelter dogs, with the least possible risk of injury or the spread of infection. The DPFL staff also provides post-visit consultation when needed to monitor progress, answer staff questions, and address implementation challenges.

**"... this is the most progressive behavior program in sheltering".**

**Dr. Pamela Reid, Ph.D CAAB  
Anti-Cruelty Behavior Team ASPCA  
Rehabilitation Center**



# Reasons To Extend The Evaluation Process Beyond The Confines Of A Kennel



Photo by Josh Feeney

Allowing dogs to be dogs in and around the shelter is often a more reliable indicator of a dog's true personality than the dog's reactions during the intake process. Yet in thousands of shelters across the country, following intake – dogs are segregated, locked up, and their emotional and physical needs are denied until they are claimed by an owner, transferred, adopted, fostered, or euthanized.

Sadly, decisions about a dog's temperament might be made during the staff's initial intake evaluation. That initial evaluation, combined with observations of the animal's behavior while kenneled, might dictate whether a dog is grouped in a crowded kennel with other canines, put into isolation for medical issues, or kenneled with a warning that the dog is aggressive or unsafe for contact with volunteers and adopters.

Further, many dogs suspected of displaying unpredictable behavior may be the first ones euthanized in order to make room for the dogs perceived as being more highly 'adoptable' based upon age, color, breed, manners, markings, and physical appearance.

Yet, the truth is that sometimes what appears to be aggressive or insecure behavior can often be attributed to the pain and suffering being experienced by that dog, an overwhelming fear of unfamiliar surroundings, or being kenneled with other

dogs that bully or deny the insecure dog food and water. Even worse, once dogs are mis-labeled, those canines may never get the chance to exit their kennel, wag their tails, sniff nature's curious smells, romp with their buddies, and show their true friendly personality in more normal circumstances. Instead, at some shelters, a death sentence can result from one unfriendly canine reaction that was actually caused by fear, confusion, illness, or pain.

A dog deprived of regular exercise, mental stimulation, and human touch can physically and emotionally decompose from the stress of being kenneled without any enrichment. DPFL allows dogs play time outside their kennels in a more natural habitat. In many cases, this enrichment tool instantly demonstrates to staff that dogs initially feared as being aggressive or unbalanced, really belong on the adoption floor.

**"My team and I were excited to host Aimee Sadler and her Dogs Playing For Life Program, but we had no idea what a game changer this training would be for every one of our team. We had two dogs on our euthanasia list for dog aggression before we started DPFL. By the end of the second day of the Program, we transferred these same two dogs to our adoption building."**

**Mary Martin, Executive Director  
Santa Fe Humane Society  
Santa Fe, New Mexico**



# DPFL Program Benefits To Shelters



Shelter staff experiencing Dogs Playing for Life have learned that a dog's immediate reactions to initial intake procedures, cage barriers, and on-leash walking, are not necessarily reliable indicators of a dog's ability to be social with other canines and adopters.



Photo by Annelie Martin

- Shelter dogs get the chance to burn off energy and counteract the stresses of shelter life.
- Exercise can make dogs more relaxed and better behaved in their kennels and when meeting potential adopters.
- Shelter dogs will learn critical dog-to-dog social skills, can help them post-adoption in developing positive relationships with dogs outside of the shelter.
- By observing a dog's state of play and social skills off the leash, shelter staff will gain a better understanding of each dog as an individual. Including its behavior in non-threatening situations. This information can be used to make better decisions about animal outcomes and potential adoption matches.
- Play groups give shelter dogs an opportunity to relieve themselves outside the building – which means less for staff to clean and disinfect inside the kennels.
- Kennel cleaning staff can work more efficiently when shelter dogs are in play groups outside of their kennels. Interestingly, kennel cleanliness has been identified by researchers as one important factor that influences a potential adopter's view of the animal and likelihood to adopt. Conversely, forcing a dog to live and eat where they defecate only increases the emotional stress and anxiety for that dog.
- DPFL increases morale among both shelter staff and volunteers. Happy, healthy, and well-adjusted dogs are more appealing to adopters, and easier to care for. Staff and volunteers will be thrilled when length of stay and euthanasia rates are decreased as a result of this program.
- Through the generosity of sponsors, DPFL is usually offered at no cost to the shelter requesting the program.



Photo by Brian George



# DPFL Program Testimonials



Photo by Josh Feeney

“Truly meeting the welfare needs of animals in shelters, whether for housing, interaction or play, can have profound effects not only for the well-being of the animals themselves, but also for staff, volunteers and the success of the overall shelter mission.”

**Kate Hurley**  
**Director, Koret Shelter Medicine Program**  
**UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine**

“Dogs Playing For Life gave our staff and volunteers the necessary tools to provide excellent quality of life for shelter dogs. The Program resulted in improved volunteer opportunities, enrichment activities, and behavior evaluations. After six months, staff and volunteers cannot imagine shelter life without the Dogs Playing For Life tool, and thankfully our dogs will never have to.”

**Nikki Harris**  
**Acting Division Chief**  
**Jacksonville Animal Care & Protective Services**

“Implementing Dogs Play for Life at our adoption center has made a huge difference for our large dogs. DPFL provides critically needed exercise and stimulation in a shelter environment, while the socialization aspect greatly increases adoption prospects. It’s an extremely valuable tool for any rescue or shelter striving to become no kill.”

**Marc Peralta**  
**Executive Director**  
**Best Friends Animal Society / Los Angeles**

“The Humane Society of the United States is pleased to promote new and innovative approaches like Aimee Sadler’s shelter playgroups program, Dogs Playing for Life. Providing shelter dogs with an outlet that gives them the mental stimulation and activity they need is an important step to ensuring their wellbeing and giving them the best opportunity for adoption into loving homes.”

**Wayne Pacelle**  
**President & CEO**  
**The Humane Society of the United States**



## About **Aimee Sadler** Founder and President



Aimee Sadler is the Director of Behavior and Training for the Southampton Animal Shelter Foundation. She is a nationally recognized trainer and speaker specializing in behavioral problems. Her techniques have been derived from twenty five years of working with multiple species, from dogs to cats, from exotics to marine mammals as a private trainer, within the entertainment industry and within animal sheltering.

Aimee presents at animal welfare and professional dog training conferences, in addition to teaching shelters how to reduce canine euthanasia through her Dogs Playing for Life! program. Aimee's training and behavior programs have proven to be successful for the Longmont Humane Society and Southampton Animal Shelter, which both regularly achieve canine live release rates in excess of 95% as open admission shelters. Today, DPFL has been introduced by Sadler and her team to shelter professionals at more than 70 shelters internationally, and at numerous national and regional animal welfare conferences.

Sadler has been asked to share her play groups expertise with forward thinking, proactive animal welfare organizations, including the ASPCA, the Humane Society of the United States, Best Friends Animal Society, the Shelter Medicine Department at UC Davis School for Veterinary Medicine, and the Maddies Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida.

Additionally, animal care professionals and dedicated volunteers can learn from Sadler through personalized internships under her supervision.

Aimee currently resides in Longmont, Colorado, with her husband Joe, five sons, four rescued dogs, and two cats.





Photo by Josh Feeney

Invite This Play Group Enrichment Program To Your Shelter — And Save More Dogs.



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