



A Better Buddy System for Staff Training

Training staff to properly manage off-leash play groups is one of the biggest challenges we face in providing quality daycare and playgroup services. This topic has consumed me for years and is the reason Off-Leash Dog Play: A Complete Guide to Safety & Fun was written by Robin and I four years ago. While our training system at Urban Tails still gets tweaked it has evolved to a point that it's a good working system to share.

The success of our system is the result of three main components:

1. Formalized on-the-job training procedure and checklist
2. Separate technical training on dog body language
3. Skills observation checklist

Formalizing the buddy training method into a formal on-the-job (OTJ) training procedure and checklist helps to ensure consistency and completeness during the training process. Our checklist includes our key processes and procedures to perform the job, timeline by week of when items are introduced and then mastered by the trainee. Some of the key points are:

- Dog management procedures
- Facility cleaning procedures
- Forms & reports
- Play schedule
- Handling emergencies
- OTJ playgroup training hours guideline

Also important to consistency is the experienced training buddy assigned to the new hire. My preference is for a manager or supervisor to train the first couple of days. After a solid introduction, additional training can be handled by lead or senior staff members that enjoy training people. This is a very important requirement for the OTJ trainer. They should also consistently follow your company procedures and understand the reasons why they exist for dog safety and client service.

Another key to our success is the OTJ playgroup training hour's guideline document. This defines how long a new hire trains in a playgroup with their trainer and how long they lead the group supervised closely prior to being "approved" as a solo playgroup leader. Our guideline defines this by playgroup as we operate five different groups in our center. We start new hires with our small less active dogs with 24 hours of buddy training and 16 hours of observed group leadership by themselves. Once they "master" the small group and are approved as a solo leader, we go back to OTJ buddy training in our next level of playgroup. Our large active dog group requires the most time in OTJ buddy training; 40 hours. We need to ensure they have the confidence and leadership skills to safely manage this challenging play group successfully.

We are very fortunate to have resources available today on technical dog language for training our staff. Of course, I am totally biased to the Off-Leash Dog Play products as your first choice for training your staff. We have produced the book, poster set and pocket guide that will aid in your training. I'm also proud to announce in this newsletter that Knowing Dogs will be available soon and our goal is for this product to be the best staff training resource in the pet industry. Whatever resource works for you

make the body language training fun and separate from the OTJ. It's overwhelming to most new hires to learn procedures, dog management skills and body language while working in an off-leash play group. Schedule some separate sessions where you can focus on teaching the body language basics and then reinforce them during the OTJ training. Be sure to check the coupon in this newsletter for a special offer on a body language game to add to your training resources.

Your last key to success is a skills observation checklist. Take a few minutes and list the job skills required for staff to safely manage playgroups in your center. Some items on our checklist are knowing names of dogs, recognizing breeds, good gate management, knowing when and which dog to correct, and recognizing arousal. Once our new hire has completed their OTJ buddy training and assigned solo hours for a specific playgroup our supervisor will observe their management of the group and complete the checklist. A minimum score in all areas is required prior to them moving on to train in our next level of playgroup. This provides great specific feedback on strong areas of performance and areas for improvement. This same tool can be used for annual staff performance reviews feedback.

The safety of our dog playgroups is only as strong as the skills of the staff members that manage them. It's important to view staff training as an investment in the quality reputation of your business and take the time to formalize your training program. We owe that to the dogs that come to us for safe, fun, social play!