

# Off-Leash Play Evaluation & **I N S T R U C T I O N S**



By The Dog Gurus



# OFF-LEASH PLAY EVALUATION INSTRUCTIONS



Use this checklist to assign a red, yellow, or green category to the dogs you evaluate for your off-leash play program. These color categories indicate a dog's probable ease of social play.

The checklist assigns a numerical score to key attributes and behaviors of each individual dog. This provides a more objective and consistent method of evaluating dogs. Consideration is given to breed-type, age, social history, human greeting, dog greeting, and social group behaviors. This checklist is based on information and descriptions contained in *Off-Leash Dog Play: A Complete Guide to Safety & Fun*, by Robin Bennett and Susan Briggs. This book should be used to clarify any terms contained in the checklist.

It can be tempting to allow puppies under 5 months of age to come to playgroup without an assessment since most puppies enjoy playing with other dogs. However, we would recommend all dogs go through the formal evaluation process regardless of age and the scoring does take into consideration the age of the dog in certain areas. A formal evaluation can be a good gauge of potential future problems and can allow you to identify any concerns early in the dog's life.

Green dogs are the easiest to manage in an off-leash playgroup. Many yellow dogs can be skillfully managed by experienced handlers, and many improve over time as they adjust to social play. Red dogs are high risk, and playgroups are probably not a good fit for these dogs.

Based on the skill level and training of your playgroup staff, choose the best mix of dogs for your center. Yellow dogs typically do well only with experienced leadership and active management. Set a specific goal for your center on the desired mix of green to yellow dogs. (We recommend starting with 80% green and 20% yellow). Commit to your percentages. Write them down. Making objective decisions will help you create a safe, fun, and successful group.

*Disclaimer: Each dog is an individual, and this checklist is a tool to quantify a long list of attributes and behaviors at a distinct moment in time. The score reflects an assessment made in a very short time when the dog is in an unfamiliar environment. As the environment becomes familiar, a dog's behavior may change significantly. As a result, dogs who score green initially may have issues in group play that cause him or her to be dismissed later. Remember, assessing suitability for off-leash play is a continuous process for your staff. The final decision on admitting or refusing a dog for playgroup rests with playgroup management. Trust your gut feelings!*

## Scoring

Each item is scored green, yellow, or red based on the specifics for that category. Points are assigned:

- Green = 3 points
- Yellow = 2 points
- Red = 1 point

In this system a high score is best as it represents a green dog that should be a good fit to the social play environment. For any item listed where the answer is not known for a specific dog (e.g., resource guarding is unknown because the dog has never been put in a position to share items) then we recommend you assign a 2 or yellow to be conservative in your assessment.



## Measurement Areas

### 1. Background

Use the Off-Leash Play Application filled out by the client to enter some initial scores in this section. Once you have met the dog, observed his or her behavior, and asked the owner any questions you may have about the profile information, you should modify the initial scoring to reflect your own observations and interpretations. (You can use your own client application form or get a copy of The Dog Gurus Off-Leash Play Application template on our website: [www.TheDogGurus.com](http://www.TheDogGurus.com).)

- a. **Breed-type** – some breeds are a better fit for social play than others. *Off-Leash Dog Play: A Complete Guide to Safety & Fun* lists common breeds by AKC group by traffic signal color on pages 48-50. Use this for your initial assessment. For mixed breeds, start with the lower breed score in the mix and modify it later if while watching the dog interact with others, you feel another breed's traits seems more prevalent.
- b. **Age** – consider the social experience of the dog as it relates to its age. Early socialization is a key factor in how well an individual dog fits into social playgroups.
  - i. *Dog with prior off-leash play experience* –
    - **Green** if 6 months to 3 years, as young dogs enjoy play and socializing; they are your target market.
    - **Yellow** if 3 – 7 years, as adult dogs generally play less and tolerate less from rowdy juveniles.
    - **Red** if over 8 years, as senior dogs like a slower, quieter environment that is not traditionally provided in off-leash play. Consider your groups and modify scoring if a calm environment for seniors can be provided.
  - ii. *Dog with no prior off-leash play experience* –
    - **Green** if under 5 months, as most puppies enjoy play and socializing. Remember they are in a vulnerable stage of development so ensure the experience is positive.
    - **Yellow** if 6 months – 3 years, as older puppies and younger adult dogs that missed early socialization may be fearful and tolerate less from rowdy juveniles. Playgroups are an unfamiliar experience, and they may need to be introduced to them slowly.
    - **Red** if over 3 years, as mature adult dogs are less likely to handle and tolerate the unfamiliar and sometimes overwhelming environment of off-leash play. Consider your groups and modify scoring if an adjustment process for adult dogs can be provided with minimal stress to the dog. Also strongly consider the reason the dog owner requires daycare (the "why" in item j below).



- c. **Social experience** – not all prior social play experiences are equal so consider the source when assigning this score. When you are not familiar with operations of another pet center, err on the side of scoring lower.
- **Green** – daycare operations where you know a safe and professionally managed environment is provided
  - **Yellow** – daycare operations that you do not know or have concerns about their management style; frequent visits to public dog parks
  - **Red** – dog only plays with a few known dogs (e.g., family, neighbor dogs); interacts with other dogs on leash only; no prior social experience or has been expelled from another daycare or off-leash playgroup
- d. **Usual play style** – this information provided by owners provides clues to how they view their dog’s play. After observing the dog during the actual observation, you may modify this score.
- **Green** – easygoing, short games, takes breaks: indicates self-control, calm appropriate play behavior
  - **Yellow** – wrestle, chase, vocal during play: all indicate risk for high arousal or prey drive
  - **Red** – rough, nonstop play, alpha, wants to be in charge: indicates risk of lack of control, inappropriate play and/or bully behaviors
- e. **When upset what behavior does your dog display?** – another indicator of temperament from owner’s perspective
- **Green** – moves away or hides: not likely to challenge, submissive
  - **Yellow** – barks, shakes, or whimpers: less tolerance and/or fear
  - **Red** – grumpy, growly, gets a “look,” “you’ll know”: low tolerance or aggression
- f. **Prey drive** – level of prey drive varies by breed and individual dog. Higher prey drive is higher risk in social playgroups as it can quickly escalate to arousal, intimidate other dogs, or in rare instances result in predatory drift. The profile may not provide much input to this factor so you may have to wait to assess until the evaluation.
- **Green** – no indicators
  - **Yellow** – chase play style, focused or staring behavior
  - **Red** – history of chasing squirrels, cats, bikes, cars, etc
- g. **Resource guarding** – assess dog’s history of sharing food and toys. How does he or she respond to other dogs or people approaching them or a resource?
- **Green** – shares toys & food with other dogs and people
  - **Yellow** – shares some items; may guard high-value items like bones or chews; behavior unknown as dog has not been in position to share food and toys
  - **Red** – owner must separate family dogs to feed, history of warning signals if approached eating

h. **Bite history** – Dog’s bite history or reaction when encountering the unfamiliar. Good bite inhibition is a very important attribute for safe social play.

- **Green** – no bites or aggressive responses in profile
- **Yellow** – history of growls, snaps, or low-level bite history – level 1 or 2 (see Ian Dunbar’s bite assessment chart reproduced on page 83, *Off-Leash Dog Play*)
- **Red** – high-level bite history – level 3 or higher or multiple instances of bites

i. **Obedience** – Dogs that are attentive, respond to cues, and exhibit self-control are much easier to manage in off-leash environments. Basic obedience training helps dogs learn all of these important attributes and is an indicator of their manageability in playgroups.

- **Green** – has attended multiple obedience classes or private sessions and owners use cues often in the home
- **Yellow** – attended one class/private session and owners use cues occasionally at home or attended multiple obedience classes and cues rarely used at home
- **Red** – no obedience training and obedience cues rarely used at home

All other combinations of answers not listed above would be scored as “Yellow”

j. **Why does the owner want the dog to attend off-leash play sessions or dog daycare?** The reasoning can provide very important insight into the owner’s drive and cues about the dog’s behavior. Some owners look to dog daycare to resolve behavior issues they are having at home. In some cases, social play is still a good fit, but in many others, it is not the best solution for the dog.

- **Green** – wants dog to play with other dogs (consider age also); so not home alone; provide another source of exercise (owner does provide daily exercise)
- **Yellow** – suggested by dog trainer or neighbor (could be in response to a behavior issue with other dogs); help separation anxiety (can your center manage during rest periods?); provide exercise (no other source provided; may result in high energy in playgroup)
- **Red** – socialization if an adult dog (high probability that dog has displayed aggressive behaviors to other dogs)

## 2. Human Interaction

- a. **Response of dog when meeting new people in a new environment.** It is important to make this assessment after giving the dog some time to explore and get comfortable in the new environment. You want to set the dog up for success and keep you and your evaluation team safe. Once you observe a positive change in the dog's body language, you should interact with the dog. Some dogs will be more environmentally focused than people focused overall. However, there is a difference between a dog who is avoiding interaction because he is more interested in something else and a dog who is avoiding interaction because he is fearful of people. Dogs that are scared may need more time to adjust to their surroundings before being handled. Regardless of the reason, dogs that are avoiding or displaying warning signals should be considered red.
- **Green** – the dog initiates interaction with you and stays for more than 2 seconds
  - **Yellow** – the dog tolerates the greeting with continued display of yellow body language and multiple stress signals
  - **Red** – the dog avoids interaction and/or displays warning signals and other aggressive displays. For safety, consider halting the evaluation at this point.
- b. **Response of dog to your touch and handling.** It is important in most centers for staff to safely touch and handle all the dogs in a playgroup. This portion of the evaluation assesses the dog's comfortable level with being touched in a friendly, gentle manner by unfamiliar people.
- **Green** – the dog is accepting of touch and shows submissive gestures
  - **Yellow** – the dog tolerates handling and shows multiple stress signals and/or initial resistance
  - **Red** – the dog displays warning signals during touch and handling. For safety, consider halting the evaluation at this point.
- c. **Response to obedience cues.** As this is an important tool in safely managing dog play, it is important to determine during the evaluation how responsive the dog is to new people giving cues.
- **Green** – dog is attentive to you calling his/her name, makes eye contact, and will respond appropriately to basic obedience cues (e.g., sit, let's go, come, etc)
  - **Yellow** – dog is not consistent in attention or response to cues; poor response when distracted or aroused
  - **Red** – dog does not make eye contact and ignores most cues

### 3. Dog Greetings

This is the core aspect of dog social evaluations. It is recommended that applicant dogs be introduced to playgroup dogs one at a time, building to a small group. During each meeting, observe the body language and behavior of **both** the applicant dog and the playgroup dogs you know (i.e., evaluator dogs).

a. **Calm, low-key adult dogs** – many centers begin introductions with calm, low-key dogs who tend to be fairly self-assured during greeting rituals. These dogs are balanced and predictable in their dog greeting behaviors. If you introduce a male and female dog, then average the overall score from both introductions.

- **Green** – applicant dog uses mostly polite dog greeting behaviors and is well-received by evaluator dogs; there is a willingness by both dogs to interact and greet.
- **Yellow** – applicant dog has some rude greeting behaviors, but these are tolerated by the evaluator dogs; there is a willingness by both dogs to interact and greet. Applicant dog is willing to interact and shows interest in other dogs; may be hesitant or nervous from fear, but does not give warning signals or only very low-level aggressive displays.
- **Red** – applicant dog's rude behaviors are corrected multiple times; evaluator dogs avoid greeting or interacting with applicant dog. Applicant dog hesitates to interact and does not show interest in other dogs (avoids eye contact or looking at them); gives warning signals. In the event multiple aggressive displays are observed and dogs avoid further greeting, the evaluation should be halted.

b. **Other dogs** – after evaluating the initial introduction, go through the same process for the other dogs you introduce individually. Average the score from all of the dog introductions you determine are necessary for your decision.

- **Green** – applicant dog uses mostly polite dog greeting behaviors and is well-received by dogs; there is a willingness by both dogs to interact and greet.
- **Yellow** – applicant dog has some rude greeting behaviors, but these are tolerated by the evaluator dogs; there is a willingness by both dogs to interact and greet. Applicant dog is willing to interact and shows interest in other dogs; may be hesitant or nervous from fear, but does not give warning signals or only very low-level aggressive displays.
- **Red** – applicant dog's rude behaviors are corrected multiple times; dogs avoid greeting or interacting with applicant dog. Applicant dog hesitates to interact and does not show interest in other dogs (avoids eye contact or looking at them); gives warning signals. In the event multiple aggressive displays are observed and dogs avoid further greeting, the evaluation should be halted.



- c. **Small group interactions** – once individual introductions are completed, it is important to assess the applicant dog's reaction to being in a social group setting. Start with a small group of dogs that the applicant dog has met individually and score their behavior.
- **Green** – enjoys interacting with dogs; plays and/or is accepted by the existing dogs into the group
  - **Yellow** – applicant dog tolerates being in the small group; displaying some stress signals; may look to humans for comfort/help or may try to hide/stay away from dogs interacting in group
  - **Red** – applicant dog avoids interactions; displays multiple stress signals and/or gives warning signs or aggressive displays; other dogs avoid interactions. Strongly consider whether social playgroup is a good environment for the applicant dog; they may prefer one-on-one play sessions with other dogs.
- d. **Larger group interactions** – once the small group evaluation is completed, assess how the dog handles greeting new dogs in the larger group environment that would be their assigned playgroup. (This may or may not happen on the initial evaluation day. In instances when this evaluation is delayed, hold the evaluation form as pending until the next visit when it should be finished.)
- **Green** – enjoys interacting with dogs; plays and/or is accepted by the existing dogs into the group
  - **Yellow** – applicant dog tolerates being in the large group; displaying some stress signals; may look to humans for comfort/help or may try to hide/stay away from dogs interacting. Monitor closely as you want to see the dog relax and get more comfortable with the playgroup throughout the day/session.
  - **Red** – applicant dog avoids interactions; displays multiple stress signals and/or gives warning signals or aggressive displays; other dogs avoid interactions. Strongly consider whether social playgroup is a good environment for the applicant dog; may prefer smaller-sized playgroups.

## 4. Playgroup Behavior

It is important to evaluate the dog's behavior during the first visit(s) to complete your initial assessment of appropriate fit for your playgroups. This evaluation may or may not happen on the day of the initial visit. In some instances it may be appropriate to make this evaluation over 2-3 different playgroup sessions.

- a. **Play** – evaluate the applicant dog's play behavior and note his/her preferred play style
  - **Green** – appropriate play in most instances; inappropriate behaviors are easily redirected
  - **Yellow** – frequent inappropriate play behaviors observed and some improvement from redirections; minimal play behaviors shown (some dogs need time to adjust to the environment so continue to monitor behavior)
  - **Red** – consistently inappropriate play resulting in dog corrections and a lot of redirections from human playgroup leaders; lack of play (see other behaviors section)
  
- b. **Stress** – evaluate the number of stress signals displayed by the applicant dog and length of time they are on display
  - **Green** – very few signals and only for a short time period
  - **Yellow** – moderate number of signals for a short time period
  - **Red** – high number of signals for extensive time period
  
- c. **Body posture** – evaluate the body posture of dog for the overall playgroup session(s)
  - **Green** – relaxed or playful postures majority of period
  - **Yellow** – alert, anxious, confident or subordinate stiff postures displayed frequently during the period
  - **Red** – aroused, fearful, or predatory postures displayed frequently during the period
  
- d. **Energy level** – evaluate the overall level of energy of the dog during the playgroup session(s)
  - **Green** – low to moderate with a natural flow between play and rest cycles; exhibits self-control
  - **Yellow** – moderate energy; high when dogs arrive or during key events; very few rest cycles taken on their own
  - **Red** – high energy most of time; instances of high arousal; rarely takes a rest from play or movement

e. **Other behaviors** – evaluate how often inappropriate off-leash play behaviors are observed during playgroup session(s); specifically watch for bully, aggressive, or fear behaviors; lack of interest from applicant dog; or avoidance from existing dogs in group. Some fearful behavior gets better with time in the environment and some worse; be sure to flag fearful applicant dogs and monitor behavior during play sessions if you do accept them into playgroup.

- **Green** – rare instances
- **Yellow** – some instances; applicant dog responds well to redirections; other dogs tolerate behaviors with appropriate corrections/warnings; applicant dog gives corrections to dogs coming into their space
- **Red** – frequent instances; multiple redirections required to manage bully or aggressive behaviors; dogs in group avoid the applicant dog; applicant dog consistently avoids interacting or being near other dogs for extended time or number of visits



# OFF-LEASH PLAY EVALUATION



# Complete checklist for dogs being evaluated for off-leash playgroups.

Dog's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Background

Category	Background	Specifics	Score 3 = Green 2 = Yellow 1 = Red
Breed-type	Breed or dominate breed traits in a mix	See pages 48 – 50 in Off-Leash Dog Play book for list by group	
Age	Dog with prior off-leash play experience	Green: 6 months – 3 years Yellow: 3 – 7 years Red: 8 years+	
	Dog with no prior off-leash play experience	Green: under 5 months Yellow: 6 months – 3 years Red: over 3 years	
Social Experience	Type of prior social experiences with other dogs	Green: Dog daycare – operations known Yellow: Dog daycare – operations unknown; public dog park Red: Few dogs, on leash only, none; expelled from daycare	
Usual Play Style	Description of usual play style	Green: Easygoing, short games Yellow: Wrestle, chase, vocal during play Red: Rough, nonstop play, alpha, wants to be in charge	
When Upset	Dog's behavior when upset	Green: Moves away, hides, submissive Yellow: Barks, shakes, whimpers Red: Grumpy, growly, gets a "look", "you'll know"	
Prey Drive	Clues to dog's prey drive	Green: No indicators Yellow: Chase play style, focused/staring behavior Red: Chases squirrels, cats, bikes, cars, etc.	
Resource Guarding	Does dog share food or toys; reaction when approached	Green: Shares toys & food with other pets Yellow: Shares unless high-value item (e.g., bone, pig's ear) or answer is unknown Red: Separate to feed, growls/snaps if approached eating	
Bite History	Dog's bite history or reaction when pushed	Green: No bites or aggressive responses in profile Yellow: Growly, snaps, single low-level bite history Red: High-level history with dogs or people; multiple instances	
Obedience	Obedience classes attended and level of use in home	Green: Multiple classes & consistent use at home Yellow: One class & some use at home; or combination of classes/home use not listed Red: No class & rarely used at home	
Why	Reason client wants dog to attend daycare	Green: Play with other dogs; so not home alone; additional exercise to what dog gets at home Yellow: Suggested by other; separation anxiety; sole source of exercise Red: Socialization (if adult dog)	
Possible Points = 30			<b>Subtotal:</b> _____



## Human Interaction

Category	Human Interaction	Specifics	Score 3 = Green 2 = Yellow 1 = Red
Meeting	Response to new people	Green: Initiates interaction and stays for more than 2 seconds Yellow: Tolerates interaction and displays stress signals Red: Avoids greeting; displays warning signals or aggression	
Handling	Response to touch and handling	Green: Very accepting Yellow: Tolerates; displays stress signals Red: Displays warning signals	
Obedience	Response to obedience cues	Green: Attentive and responsive Yellow: Some positive responses Red: Ignores most cues and eye contact	
Possible Points = 9			<b>Subtotal:</b> _____

## Dog Greeting

Category	Dog Greetings	Specifics	Score 3 = Green 2 = Yellow 1 = Red
Calm, low-key Adult Dogs	Reaction to meeting balanced, confident dogs &/or first dogs introduced	Green: Polite behaviors Yellow: Some rude behaviors tolerated Red: Rude behaviors corrected and accepted or avoids greeting	
Other Dogs	Reaction to meeting other individual dogs	Green: Polite behaviors Yellow: Some rude behaviors tolerated Red: Rude behaviors corrected and accepted or avoids greeting	
Small Group	Reaction to being in small group of dogs	Green: Enjoys interactions; plays Yellow: Tolerates interactions; some stress signals displayed Red: Avoids interactions; multiple stress signals; warning signals	
Large Group	Reaction to being in large group of dogs; prospective playgroup	Green: Enjoys interactions; plays Yellow: Tolerates interactions; some stress signals displayed Red: Avoids interactions; multiple stress signals; warning signals	
Possible Points = 12			<b>Subtotal:</b> _____

## Playgroup Behavior

Category	Playgroup Behavior	Specifics	Score 3 = Green 2 = Yellow 1 = Red
Play	Play behaviors <i>Play style:</i> _____	Green: Appropriate in most instances; easily redirected Yellow: Frequent inappropriate behaviors or shows little interest in playing Red: Consistently inappropriate play requiring redirection	
Stress	Number of stress signals displayed and length of time	Green: Very few for a short time period Yellow: Moderate number for a short time period Red: High level for extensive time period	
Body Posture	Overall dog body language displayed	Green: Relaxed or playful postures most of the time Yellow: Alert, anxious, confident, or subordinate postures displayed frequently Red: Aroused, fearful, predatory postures displayed frequently	
Energy Level	Energy level during play group	Green: Low to moderate with play and rest cycles; self-control Yellow: Moderate; high at arrival or key events; few rest cycles Red: High most of period; instances of high arousal; rarely rests	
Other Behaviors	Instances observing inappropriate off-leash group behaviors:	Green: Rare instances Yellow: Some instances; responds well to redirections; other dogs tolerate behaviors with appropriate corrections/warnings Red: Frequent; multiple redirections required to manage bully/aggressive behaviors; other dogs avoid the dog	
Possible Points = 15			<b>Subtotal:</b> _____
			<b>Total Score:</b> _____

- Green Dog = 66 - 51
- Yellow Dog = 50 - 36
- Red Dog = 35-22

Additional notes or observations:

