

The Behavior Department

Canine Play: The Good, the Bad, and the Squeaky

Help adopters learn the right way to play with their pooches

BY PATRICIA MCCONNELL, PH.D., C.A.A.B.



Dogs often simulate fighting behaviors in play—but they use body signals to let their play partners know they're just kidding around. INDIA LAWSON

No doubt about it, healthy and happy dogs love to play. And we love to watch them do it; all that romping and frolicking feels so carefree and joyful, even when we're just observing.

But how often do you associate the words "important" or "serious" with the concept of play? Probably not very often. But play is important, terrifically so.

Play is powerful stuff—it influences relationships, social and physical development, motivation, emotions, physiology, communication, and behavior. Wow. But there's more: How a dog plays (or doesn't) can tell us a lot about his history, his ability to socialize with others, and his level of emotional control—all important questions to answer when a dog is looking for a new home. It's also crucial to help new

dog owners understand that the way they play with their dog can enhance their relationship, or create serious problems.

Wanna Play?

First off, let's look at whether a particular dog is playful or not. Age and personality are important factors, of course, but it's meaningful if a dog is completely disinterested in play. A lack of interest in certain types of play can suggest something about a dog's early history.

Although I've never seen any research on this topic, it appears that dogs who develop in sterile, neglected environments simply don't play, especially with objects. I once evaluated a group of dogs in northern Wisconsin who had been tethered in a dark barn for years. Few of them showed interest in toys of any kind,

even years later after relaxing into loving homes. I suspect that there is a kind of critical period for what biologists call "object play," and that dogs who grow past the age of two without any toys show little interest in them as adults. (You can turn this around in some dogs by giving them hollow toys stuffed with food. The ol' standby, the regular Kong, is great for this purpose.) Some of these neglected dogs become passionate about toys after about a year in their new homes, but you can make some educated guesses about their upbringing if it takes that long.

Play can also be used as a measure of well-being. Many dogs in shelters would love to play with toys, but are too inhibited or stressed to do so in a shelter setting. Animal welfare scientists who evaluate well-being in captive wild animals often

use play as the ultimate test—few animals play if they are anxious or scared. If you want to get an eyeball evaluation of how your shelter is doing, look to see if you see any dogs playing in their kennels. You might have to look hard, but if you see play in your shelter, you might give yourself a pat on the back. (Of course, things are much more complicated on a case-by-case basis. Some dogs play to relieve stress—my young border collie Will plays vigorously with his rope toy while I'm making his dinner—but this is hardly a situation of extreme stress, and a far cry from a shelter setting.)

Plays Well with Others (Or Not!)

Most of the play in a shelter setting is play between two dogs taken to an outdoor exercise area. This is another context in which play can teach you a lot about a particular dog. Well-socialized, psychologically healthy dogs play in predictable, stereotypical ways. They have to; dogs do things during play sessions that would be considered fighting in other contexts, so it's critical that what they do is perceived as friendly rather than aggressive. (People are no different—imagine if what you see on a football field happened in a supermarket parking lot between people who'd never met!) Thus, the purpose of play signals is to make sure that when an animal plays, other animals understand that what is going on is play, and not some other type of behavior.

The two most important signals to watch for when observing dogs playing with one another are play bows and pauses. We all know what play bows look like: dogs lower their forequarters and keep their hindquarters upright. This signal is seen most commonly at the beginning of a play session, and also during brief pauses within a play bout. Biologists call the play bow a "metacommunication," meaning that it's a signal that provides information about the signals to follow. Our best human translation of canine play bows is "Just kidding! Don't take all this biting and lunging seriously!" Thus it's no surprise that unfamiliar dogs tend to play bow at highest levels at

the beginning of play sessions, whereas good buddies can sometimes skip the preliminaries and get right into it!

Although there is no definitive research on this, Karen London and I believe that once play has begun, play bows function to create pauses in the vigorous nature of social play. In appropriate play, dogs often stop for a brief moment and then resume play, alternating chasing, batting, and mouthing with play bows and standing still. These pauses create breaks in the high-energy, high-arousal kind of play that can lead to over-arousal and eventually to trouble. Remember the joke: "I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out"?

You can use these pauses to determine if dogs are playing appropriately or not. Well-socialized dogs with good emotional control may play vigorously, but they take frequent breaks that avoid the problems that arise when individuals become overly aroused and fail to respond to the behavior of their partner by pulling back a bit. Play styles are an excellent way of evaluating a dog's impulse control, and how well he'll do in any type of stimulating environment.

Dogs who don't take pauses during play often end up in trouble, either during the play session itself—which can lead to the kind of aggression you see at sporting events when the fans get out of control!—or in other contexts that require some emotional maturity. Dogs who don't pause during play are sometimes like playground bullies, who have their own good time at the expense of others. Watch out for dogs who ignore other dogs' signals and impose themselves on dogs who are no longer willing partners in play. It's always a good idea to interrupt a suspicious play session and watch to see if both dogs initiate play again. If one attempts to escape, then the dogs aren't playing anymore—one is bullying the other, and it's time for you to intervene. Some dogs play very well with others of the same size or intensity,

but bully smaller or more deferential dogs—an important piece of information to gather when placing a dog in a home with others.

A Tale of Two Species

You'd think that our mutual love of play would make it easy for people and dogs to play together, but that's not always the case. After all, we are two different species, and it's not surprising that occasionally we miscommunicate. Sometimes that simply means that our dogs don't bring back the ball, but other times it can result in dangerous or frightening experiences. Misunderstandings during play can result in serious problems between people and dogs, and are undoubtedly one reason many adolescent dogs are surrendered to shelters. Adolescent dogs have the strength and power of almost full-grown dogs, and yet haven't developed the kind of emotional maturity that keeps their social play within polite boundaries. Combine that with our lack of knowledge about how to play appropriately with dogs, and you've got a recipe for trouble.

Shelters are in a good position to use play to match the right dog with the right home, and to educate the public about appropriate and inappropriate play between people and dogs. First off, they can evaluate dogs who come into their facility to judge the dog's ability to control herself when aroused during play. Dogs who quickly become mouthy or overly aroused during play are obviously not good candidates for placement in homes with children. Most progressive shelters already have evaluation procedures that involve play, and I salute them for it.

Shelters can also help to educate the public about how to play with dogs in a way that ensures everyone is having a good time. Here is some advice adapted from *Play Together, Stay Together* that should help adopters keep play sessions safe and enjoyable.

Feel free to pass it along to adopters so they can help keep their dogs happy in their new homes!

Tips for Adopters on Safe, Fun Play

Your body is not a toy!

It's not a good idea to let your dog play by biting or mouthing your arm or hand, no matter how gently. It's true that some dogs have done this all their lives and have never gotten in trouble because of it. Perhaps you've known a dog who played like that her entire life and never hurt a play partner. That's great, but unfortunately, trainers and behaviorists see the other side all too often—dogs who hurt someone, sometimes badly, in the middle of a play session.

Dogs who play by biting at hands and arms are too likely to bite too hard when the play gets overly arousing. Sometimes these bites are truly accidental, and sometimes they are the result of a dog who has lost her temper and bitten out of anger or frustration.

Most often, dogs can get overly aroused when playing with people too, and it can be harder to spot the signs of too much arousal when you're in the middle of the excitement and having fun yourself—until it has gone too far and all of a sudden the fun is over. Keep it safe, and play with balls, flying discs, and other dog toys and keep your hands and body out of the game.



Rough play may seem benign but can cause a dog to feel frustrated or threatened. This may lead to "out-of-the-blue" bites during wrestling, or to future incidents of aggression. OLAF LOOSE/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

No rough-and-tumble wrestle play.

Wrestle play is highly stimulating, and emotional arousal can get the best of any dog. Remember: Many of the actions in canine play are similar to those used in serious fights or predation. A dog who misinterprets another individual's actions may feel he is only defending himself, or he may feel a need to remind another dog of what's appropriate and what's not. It's the same fundamental problem that gets dogs into trouble when they're allowed to bite at you—except during wrestle play, you're down on the ground with your face next to a predator who has carpet knives in his mouth.

Ponder all this when your 5-year old niece starts to get down on the floor and wrestle with your dog. And yes, it's true, there are lots of dogs who can play-wrestle for years without a problem and who would never harm a child no matter what the child did. However, there are lots of dogs who have been fine for years, until all of a sudden, out of the blue, a serious bite occurs. Do your dog and family a favor and keep this from happening by avoiding this confusing behavior from the start.

Be careful about teasing.

Be thoughtful about teasing your dog. It's not always a bad thing to do—sometimes

playing "hard to get" can stimulate a dog's interest in a toy or a game, but continuing it for too long can frustrate your dog or teach her never to trust you. (It's fine to wave a tug toy momentarily out of your dog's reach, but give her access to it once she looks interested.)

However, there are ways to tease dogs that aren't fun for them at all, and that can lead to serious problems down the road. Here's some teasing you should never do: Poking, slapping or pinching at a dog, and then pulling your hand away before the dog can nip. It's a guaranteed ticket to trouble, because all of those actions are asking the dog to reciprocate—with his teeth.

There's another reason to avoid this type of play, and it's a compelling one. Teasing dogs by slapping and poking at them may be fun for the person who chooses to do it ("Look what I can get the dog to do!"), but it's not much fun for the dog. This kind of "play" is reminiscent of a playground bully who uses his power to harass or frighten a weaker child just because he can. It's not kind or friendly in any way. Teasers should remember that, unlike the 90-pound weakling on the beach, dogs have weapons in their mouths, and sometimes they use them when they get frustrated. Frustration is not an emotion known for eliciting a



Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D., is a certified applied animal behaviorist and the co-author (with Karen London, C.A.A.B.) of *Play Together, Stay Together: Happy and Healthy Ways to Play with Your Dog*. You can find it, and her other books, at patriciamccconnell.com. Visit her blog at theotherendoftheleash.com.

thoughtful, measured response. Don't send a dog into the emotional equivalent of road rage and then blame the dog.

Know the signs of over-arousal.

No matter how you play, you might have the type of dog who tends to get overly aroused when she gets excited. Just like some children, some dogs come hard-wired to spiral into a state of emotional overload in seemingly low-key situations. Other dogs, especially adolescents, haven't yet perfected their emotional thermostats, and need their owners to help them learn to keep their emotions in check.

Try observing your dog during regular play. Become familiar with her normal repertoire, because dogs tend to do the same kinds of things when they get overly aroused, just more so. In general, their movements are faster, their leaps are higher, and their barks are louder. Sometimes you'll notice that their movements look less coordinated and less precise, as if they are physically spinning out of control (they are!). If a dog has been play-growling, listen for the growls to get lower and to sound more threatening. On the other hand, listen for barks to become more rapid and often, counterintuitively, higher in pitch.

Some dogs add new actions to their repertoire when they become overly aroused. Dogs who were politely playing tug or fetch might start leaping up and nipping at your arm. Be especially careful if your dog starts leaping up at you repeatedly, perhaps pushing off you with her forepaws, punching you with her muzzle, or clacking her teeth together while her head is directed toward you. These are dogs who might be losing emotional control, or who are becoming overly aroused, and who are telling you that you're going to be the target of their pent-up, uninhibited energy. If this happens, it is time to call on your inner playground monitor.

Another good predictor of over-arousal is a dog who simply can't stop doing what she's doing—you call, ask her to sit, come, or lie down, and she continues leaping or barking in an out-of-control kind of way.



Owners can calm an over-aroused pooch by talking to him in a calm voice—or by giving him a kid-style “time out”! INDIA LAWSON

Fixed and rounded eyes can also be a sign that a dog is emotionally overloaded—and are another good reason to develop a precise picture of how your dog looks when she's playing appropriately.

Teach your dog to chill.

It's always better to prevent problems than to try to fix them later, so be mindful about your role in your dog's emotions. Ask yourself if you or your family members are contributing to your dog's over-arousal. Enthusiastic play in dogs is great fun to watch, so it is not surprising that people encourage their dogs to be goofy and out-of-control-silly during play. That's often fine, but it's important to know the difference between “endearingly silly” and “about-to-bite-the-kids” crazy. Be thoughtful about your own actions, and monitor how much you hype your dog up by speaking excitedly or by making quick, darting movements around an already excited dog.

You can also teach your dog a “play is over” signal. It's remarkably easy to do, and it comes in handy in many contexts. You can use anything that doesn't sound like another cue, perhaps “All done” or “Time's up.” Begin by playing with your dog in your usual way—perhaps throwing a ball or playing tug. Once your dog is en-

gaged in the game, say “All done” in a low, quiet voice and immediately change your posture. Stand up straight, turn slightly to the side and look away from your dog. Pause for a moment, keeping your body relaxed but staying quiet and disengaged. Most dogs will play along, and stand still for a moment too, waiting to see what happens next. If that's the case, say “Go-o-od girl” in a low, quiet voice, stretching out the “go-o-o-o-o-o-d” so it takes a full second to say, and then resume play right away. Don't expect a long pause—all you want is a brief moment of stillness. If you wait too long, you'll miss the moment, and your dog will try to start the play session again by herself. Simply go still, say “Good!” when she does too, and then use more play to reinforce her for being so responsive. If she doesn't pause at all, even for one second, turn and walk away, making it clear that the play session is over.

Shakespeare was right—the play's the thing! It's central to healthy and happy relationships between dogs and the people who love them. The more your two-legged adopters learn about play, the better their relationships with their new four-legged family members will be. And that's the key to keeping dogs and people happy together, the goal of all of us who love dogs and want to help them. AS