



Making Sense of Dog Play

by

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Dog interactions are so different from human interactions, so much sniffing and snorting and thrashing about. There seem to be as many styles of dog play as there are dogs, so it can be a challenge to discern what *is* play and what isn't. It's no wonder we're at a loss when a fight starts that we never saw coming. Still, there are some basic principles that can help you begin to translate the doggie ballet taking place before your eyes.



Howdy Do!

Polite dog introductions are a joy to behold. Polite dogs will arc toward one another, the more submissive averting his glance in deference, and will do a cursory sniff around the head and neck, followed by a more prolonged sniff of the rear and genitals. Then things will move on... Playful mates will commence with a play bow (front quarters lower than hind quarters) or invite a brisk game of chase. Quieter companions will amble on after making the acquaintance.

The show of hackles, also known as piloerection, is an indication of a heightened state of arousal. It is not necessarily an indication of a dog about to act aggressively, though, depending on the dog, the winds could certainly blow in that direction. What arousal does mean is that a dog will be quicker to act and not *think* first. And dogs in the vicinity is that the dog is in an aroused, unstable state. Not long afterwards will come the shake-off, when a dog will shake her body as if shaking off water. This communicates to the group that she is now in a calmer, more stable state and is not as likely to be rash or reactive.

Dogs At Play

The purpose of play is to rehearse important natural behaviors: hunting, fighting, fleeing, and sexual behavior. So it's not surprising that activities such as biting and chasing are part of play. And, though most dogs have been neutered, it is perfectly natural that their play would include sexually derived behaviors like mounting and humping.

Different breeds tend to practice different play styles, and this should be a consideration when choosing a playmate. Standard poodles prefer games of chase accented by polite play bows and are completely put off by the rude body slamming, paw jabbing style of boxers. So it is important to know your own dog's play style so that you can make good matches for play dates. Find a laid back player for your laid back dog; a bouncy, playful playmate if you have a tigger; and a dog who enjoys playing chase for your gleeful runner.

Another important characteristic of good play is role reversal. The chaser becomes the chased; the jumper becomes the jumped. For this reason, size disparity is undesirable. How frustrating for a little terrier to be consistently manhandled by its pit bull playmate, even if both dogs like to wrestle! Like a feather-weight sparring with a super-heavyweight.

An equally serious concern inherent in size disparities is that of predatory drift, in which a smaller dog (or cat) moves in a prey-like way that triggers a sudden predatory response from a larger dog or a group of dogs. This is a recipe for potentially deadly disaster.

Take a Break

When polite dog players play together, they take periodic breaks in the action to let things cool off. They might sniff a tuft of grass or get a drink of water, maybe solicit some attention from a human. Then they will resume playing again, refreshed and calm. When allowed to continue for too long, aroused play can spiral into a fight. If your dog player does not take breaks voluntarily, you should step in and impose a short break every few minutes. Call your dog away or go get him; then ask for a “sit” or “down” for 30 seconds before releasing him back to play.

Quarrels Happen

Short, noisy quarrels are a natural occurrence in dog interactions and can be instructive, given that the receiver understands and respects the message of the sender. Should the message be ignored, things can escalate.

My clients have a rude adolescent male dobie mix named Sparky*, who has proven to be too strong a force for a great many dogs. In a recent play session between him and Trista, my 4-year-old German Shepherd female, Sparky put his forelegs on Trista’s back immediately upon meeting her. In human terms, this is a bit like punching a stranger playfully in the arm upon meeting him on the street. In response, Trista snarked him, growling and turning to air snap and chase him away – a perfectly appropriate correction for a mature female to give a rude young hoodlum. In doggie terms, she was saying “Knock it off, you whippersnapper! Show a little respect!” Sparky’s response was similarly appropriate; he took the snarking respectfully, fleeing from her and not pushing his luck. Over the course of their interaction, they hit their stride – Sparky gamely allowed Trista the joy of the chase, occasionally bouncing into her to incite her to play but never again jumping up on her.

Sparky needs many such interactions with dogs who can offer an appropriate, inhibited correction. Without such an education, his behavior could someday elicit a more dangerous response from a dog with less tolerance, a dog who will escalate his response into a fight.

Points of Friction

Doorways and narrow passages can heighten arousal and provoke friction. If, when entering a dog park, dogs have gathered at the entrance, wait for their owners to call them away or for them to get bored and disperse. It can be intimidating for the arriving dog to be surrounded by a barrage of dogs. Practice the same etiquette with your own dog.

Also be attentive to dogs’ behaviors around resources such as tennis balls or the water bowl. Be wary of dogs who get stiff, show their eye whites, or lift a lip when other dogs get too close to them with the prized possession.

Parenting

Ultimately, you must decide whether you feel comfortable with the interactions that your dog is having and whether your dog is enjoying his playmates. Look for signals of stress such as lip licking or yawning, for avoidant behavior like hiding behind you, or for escapist behavior like jumping up or clawing at you. These are calls for help and should not be ignored. As your dog's guardian, he is trusting you to intervene on his behalf, to make choices for him that he cannot make for himself.

Sometimes the energy of the dog run can be electric with tension, with several dogs snarking each other. Trista seems magnetically drawn to the eyes of these storms. If such is the case, you should remove your dog. If other owners are allowing their dogs to play inappropriately without intervening, taking a "they'll work it out for themselves" attitude, remove your dog. That is precisely the kind of environment where play can escalate into something more serious.

Conversely, if your own dog is being a bully despite repeated breaks and time-outs, remove your dog. Allowing him to practice such behavior is giving him the opportunity to perfect an undesirable skill.

The Dog Park: A Cautionary Tail

Dog parks are fraught with uncertainty and potential danger; going to them is a gamble. They are a gathering place for unknown dog players as well as dog parents with varying parenting styles. Plenty of dogs who are inappropriate, even downright dangerous, players are nonetheless taken to dog parks and allowed their antics. Making play dates with individual other dogs who are well matched to your own dog's play style is always preferable. If you are going to venture into a dog run, it is prudent to watch the play from outside of the park initially, gauging the players and whether your dog will enjoy being with them and whether she will be her best self in their company.

Further, just like some humans prefer intimate dinners with close friends over the glitz of a huge party with a hundred strangers, so there are dogs who will prefer the one-on-one play of a playdate with a good friend to the free-for-all nature of the dog run. So know your dog.

Matinee at the Doggie Ballet

I can remain transfixed for hours watching the beauty of loose, happy play – eyes bright, mouths lax and gaping, tongues lolling, tails swinging happily. Sometimes it's graceful with its play bow invitations; sometimes it's athletic with its feints and jumps and galloping chases.

Whatever its flavor, the most indicative characteristic of play is its wasteful use of energy. A playful dog will make loose, bouncy, exaggerated lateral movements, while a dog with more serious intent will have an economy of motion.

So now that you understand the dance steps, it will be easier to enjoy the show, don't you think?!

❖ Names have been changed to protect the innocent.